

Keeping Your Heart Healthy

Since you have congenital heart disease, it's very important for you to follow the "healthy-heart recommendations" for diet and activity. No matter what type of heart disease you have, a better overall level of physical fitness will help you do your normal daily activities more easily. Also, you have the same risk of developing other heart diseases, such as coronary artery disease or high blood pressure, as other people your age. That's why you should eat a balanced diet, maintain a reasonable body weight and stay at least moderately physically active (within any limits your cardiologist gives you). You should also have your cholesterol level checked by your physician regularly, especially if your family has a history of heart disease.

Smoking tobacco, using intravenous drugs or taking street drugs such as cocaine can damage your heart. In fact, these behaviors are even riskier for you than for people without congenital heart disease. Avoid these unsafe practices at all times.

Following the recommendations of your cardiologist is important for keeping your heart healthy. These recommendations include:

- Keep your follow-up appointments.
- Take your medicines as prescribed.
- Make sure you have the necessary tests done when your doctor orders them.
- Follow any physical activity recommendations and restrictions.

If you feel that a treatment or follow-up is making you feel worse or is unnecessary, talk with your cardiologist before you make any changes to the plan.

Be sure to get regular medical care from your primary care physician. Even though you have a cardiologist, you still need a primary care doctor who is in charge of all your medical care.

You also need regular dental care to minimize the chance of an infection that could affect your heart. There are guidelines for using antibiotics for dental work. Your cardiologist will tell you if you need to take antibiotics, based on the type of heart disease that you have.

If you're considering taking over-the-counter medications, vitamins, herbal preparations or prescription medications, you need to check their effect on the heart. Discuss any potential cardiac side effects or drug interactions with your primary care physician, cardiologist or pharmacist.

It's also important to discuss your heart disease with your doctors before having a surgical procedure. Sometimes the surgery or anesthesia can affect your heart, too.

One of the most important things to do to maintain your health is to learn as much about your heart disease as you can. This includes knowing the kind of heart defect you have, what surgeries were done and how your heart is working. Always carry a list of your medicines, including how much, how often and why you take them. Don't rely on your parents, children, family members, primary care doctor or anyone else to do this for you!