



Discussion with Dr. Nkiru Osude, MD Cardiologist

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# LET'S DISCUSS HEART HEALTH



**February is American Heart Month.** Each year, during February, we should each pause to check in with our bodies and evaluate our own heart health. Cardiovascular (heart) disease is the leading cause of death in the United States. Heart disease is a broad diagnosis that includes different problems with the heart: coronary artery disease (heart artery blockages), arrhythmias (abnormal heart rhythm), and heart failure (decreased heart muscle function).

Coronary artery disease is the most common type of heart disease. Unlike other types of heart disease, coronary artery disease is mostly preventable. Coronary artery disease is when the arteries that supply the heart muscle have blockages, leading to poor blood flow to the heart. Symptoms can include shortness of breath with movement, chest pressure, chest pain, or even heart attacks. In many people, the early stages of coronary artery disease are silent, meaning there are no symptoms to tell someone they have blockages. It is very important to understand your risk of heart disease and prevent blockages from occurring and/or progressing. Below are my five favorite ways to understand and improve one's heart health.

## 5 Ways to Check-In With Your Heart Health

**1. Know Your Numbers** - Check Your A1C (diabetes number), Cholesterol, and Blood Pressure! There are several things that can increase your risk of heart disease. There are some risk factors you can't change, like your age, sex, and genetics... and there are things you can, like blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and blood sugar (glucose) levels. By having controlled blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar levels, one can decrease their risk of having strokes and heart attacks. When was the last time you had your A1C, cholesterol, or blood pressure checked? Were they normal? If not, I would recommend talking to your doctor about life-saving medications that can be taken to decrease your risk and improve your numbers.

**2. Eat a Heart-Healthy Diet** - There are a lot of great diets out there, but my favorite two diets that focus on heart health are the Mediterranean diet and the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet. The Mediterranean diet is high in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, fish and limits red meats. People who follow this diet have a lower risk of strokes and heart attacks. The DASH diet, which is proven to lower blood pressure, is also high in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and poultry.

The main difference between the DASH diet and other diets is the DASH diet is low in salt (sodium). People on the DASH diet eat less than 2,300 mg of salt/day and, as a result, have large reductions in blood pressure. Dietary changes are hard to follow at first, but consider adding more vegetables to your diet or eating less salt as a first step this week...and then make another change next week.



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## 5 Ways to Check-In With Your Heart Health continued....

3. **Get a Coronary Calcium Score** - For my patients 40 years or older who have a higher risk of heart disease and we are trying to decide how aggressive to be with heart disease prevention, I often recommend a coronary calcium score. This is done with a low-dose CAT scan that looks for and quantifies how much calcium is in someone's heart arteries. Calcium deposition in heart arteries predicts the presence of coronary artery disease (heart artery blockages). Some people who are at high risk of coronary disease aren't aware that they currently have blockages in their heart arteries because the blockages aren't causing symptoms. This is the best time for prevention! If the calcium score is abnormally high, I recommend more aggressive cholesterol-lowering medications and possible aspirin therapy. Talk to your doctor to see if this test is right for you. **Recommended age group is 40 - 80 years old.**



4. **Exercise**- I cannot stress the importance of exercise enough! Did you know that sitting for long periods of time is associated with diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and even death? Just by moving, you can decrease your risk and improve your heart health! The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommends 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise and two days of muscle strength training each week. However, if you are currently inactive, consider starting gradually and increasing your intensity and workout time over weeks to months. Anything is better than nothing. Before exercising, I would recommend talking with your doctor so he/she can give you their recommendations on the types of activities that are best for you.

5. **Check in With Your Doctor Before Making Any of the Above Changes** - Improving one's heart health is a marathon and not a sprint. By discussing the above with your doctor they can help you make a safe plan that is catered to your body, your medical conditions, and your numbers.

### Learn the ABC'S of Heart Health.

Keep them in mind every day and especially when you talk to your health provider:

- **A**ppropriate aspirin therapy for those who need it
- **B**lood pressure control
- **C**holesterol management and cessation of smoking

**For More Information,** Call or Click on the Links to the Websites.

[www.heart.org](http://www.heart.org) or call 1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721)

<https://www.cdc.gov/heartdisease/>

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