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(credit to AARP)

February is Black History Month and Heart Health month. Cardiovascular disease is the number 1 cause of death in the U.S., according to the American Heart Association, But Black adults are at greater risk than white adults and all other minorities in the United States. In 2018, Black Americans were 30 percent more likely to die from heart disease than white Americans. And heart disease develops at a younger age in Black women and men than in white adults.

Knowledge is power, and you can improve your chances of preventing heart disease and stroke by understanding your risks and taking steps to address them. The American Heart Association has updated its checklist of essential components for ideal heart and brain health, adding a good night's sleep to the mix, among other changes.

The AHA checklist first identified seven metrics for cardiovascular health in 2010. The latest update — now up to eight factors — is guided by more than a decade of scientific research. It also attempts to do a better job of discerning racial, ethnic and other demographic differences in heart health.

If you are like most Americans, there is room for improvement when it comes to lowering your risk for heart disease. But it's not always easy. I'd like to think of myself here at 66 years old as being healthy. I try to walk a few miles at least 3 to 4 days per week; my diet is low in red meat and I get plenty of sleep. But there is room for improvement. I want to eat a healthy diet, but like many people working a full-time job, I don't always have the time to shop and prepare the healthiest of meals. I am trying to get better at preparing meals on the weekend and freezing them for the upcoming week. This strategy would be an improvement on opening a can of tuna for dinner on a weeknight! Also, a friend recently directed me to a website called [smittenkitchen.com](http://smittenkitchen.com) for quick and easy healthy meals for the weeknight. Keeping peeled and ready to eat fruit in a bowl in the fridge offers an easy snack - it's much more tempting to eat when all you need to do is grab it from the fridge!

## How do you measure up? Here's the checklist:

**1. Diet:** Score higher by eating more fruit, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy, nuts and legumes and consuming less red or processed meat, sweetened drinks and salt.

**2. Physical activity:** The optimal level is 150 minutes of moderate physical activity or more per week or 75 minutes per week of vigorous-intensity physical activity, as defined by the U.S. Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans. Only 1 in 4 Americans report achieving the optimal level of physical activity, according to the AHA.

**3. Nicotine exposure:** Don't smoke. That includes e-cigarettes or vaping.

**4. Sleep:** Ideally, you should average 7 to 9 hours nightly. "The new metric of sleep duration reflects the latest research findings: Sleep impacts overall health, and people who have healthier sleep patterns manage health factors such as weight, blood pressure or risk for Type 2 diabetes more effectively.

**5. Body mass index:** Although it is considered an imperfect measure, a BMI between 18.5 and 24.9 is associated with the highest levels of cardiovascular health. However, research suggests the range may differ depending on race or ethnicity. About 100 million Americans are considered obese, according to the AHA.

**6. Blood lipids (cholesterol):** When it comes to cholesterol and triglycerides, focus on non-HDL cholesterol numbers that, when high, are linked to cardiovascular disease risk. They can also be measured without fasting beforehand.

**7. Blood glucose (sugar):** The metric has been expanded to include the option of hemoglobin A1c readings, a key measure to assess type 2 diabetes risk. The AHA notes that more than 28 million Americans have type 2 diabetes.

**8. Blood pressure:** Shoot for blood pressure levels that are less than 120/80 mm Hg (the optimal range). Hypertension is defined as 130–139 mm Hg systolic pressure (the top number in a reading) or 80–89 mm Hg diastolic pressure (bottom number). Approximately 121.5 million people in the U.S. have high blood pressure, according to the AHA.

If you think or know that your heart health isn't where you want it to be, you can get started today making small changes to improve.