

The Online Parenting Newsletter vol.5 no.2 Feb, 2004:

HEART HEALTH STARTS EARLY

Here we are in February when everybody starts thinking about candy hearts and all those red hearts on valentine cards.

Let's take a minute to think about REAL hearts, the ones beating right now in your chests and in your children's chests.

Medical science and public health measures greatly reduced the scourge of infections that killed zillions of people in the pre-immunization and pre-antibiotic era. Today heart disease is the number one killer. (You're right, heart disease is not the leading killer in the young. It is another largely preventable cause: accidents.)

But today many cases of heart disease can be prevented, especially early deaths (in the 40s and 50s) from coronary artery disease. How? By life style changes. The two biggies that can save your life (besides, of course, not smoking) are exercise and sensible eating.

Life style habits start in childhood. Parents are key here because kids watch us and do what we do. Are you a couch potato who eats lots of potato chips?

Chances are your children will do the same thing. Plus we are the ones who plan the meals and dish out the food. Are you serving your kids huge portions and (gasp!) making them finish their meal before you let them eat dessert? The habit of eating more than you want or need can start right at your table.

Start protecting your children's hearts. It's really quite simple, there are only two steps to this heart-healthy program.

1) Set up a family exercise program. Take walks together, encourage your children to play outdoors, limit TV, park the car in the last row at the market instead of circling to find the closest place. You get the idea: you keep moving and get the kids moving.

2) Feed your kids and yourself what I told my own children was a "happy, healthy diet." Offer your children healthy foods like lowfat milk, lean protein, vegetables, fruit, cheese, whole grains. Keep portions small (let the child ask you for more, don't ask the child to clean the plate). Keep junk food to a minimum. Prepare healthy snacks ahead of time. Parents don't have to be fanatic, just sensible. Of course you can all eat a chocolate heart for Valentine's Day, but eat apples most other days.

Habits--both harmful and healthy--come about when we do something over and over again, not just once in a while.