Heart Health Month

Message for Commanding Officers

Heart disease remains the number one killer of both men and women in the United States.[1] While heart disease is often viewed as something that only affects older individuals, an estimated six in 10 preventable heart disease and stroke deaths happen to people under age 65.[2]

Tobacco use, physical inactivity, unhealthy eating, and being overweight increase the risk of heart disease and, for Sailors and Marines, can negatively impact their career and compromise mission readiness.[3] Fleet and Marine Corps Health Risk Assessment data indicates that some active duty Sailors and Marines participate in unhealthy lifestyle behaviors that contribute to this risk such as smoking and eating a diet with high fat foods. Diabetes is also considered to be a major controllable risk factor for heart disease.[5] In fact, adults with diabetes are at least twice as likely to have heart disease or a stroke as adults without diabetes.[5] About 95 percent of people with diabetes have type 2 diabetes or insulin resistance.[6] People with diabetes who are physically inactive, follow an unhealthy diet, and use tobacco are more likely to develop heart disease.[5] This is why it's important for Sailors and Marines at risk for type 2 diabetes to take steps to prevent getting type 2 diabetes by losing weight, improving diet, and increasing physical activity.

The good news is that heart health can be improved at any age by eating a nutritious diet that is low in saturated fats and salt, taking part in moderate to vigorous physical activity most days of the week, maintaining a healthy weight, and quitting tobacco use. Adopting these healthier lifestyle behaviors will help improve your command's fitness now, and will also keep your command in top shape and make them stronger for the years to come. Contribute to your command's overall health by promoting tools and resources that contribute to a healthy heart.

What Can Leadership Do?

Commanding officers can promote healthy heart lifestyle behaviors among their Sailors and Marines:

- If you use tobacco products, become a role model by quitting and modeling the healthy behavior of a tobacco free lifestyle.

- Ensure your command is following all Department of Defense (DoD) and Department of the Navy (DoN) instructions and policies on tobacco use such as the Navy and Marine Corps Tobacco Policy (SECNAV 5100.13E), as well as any local policies implemented by your installation or platform.
- Support your Sailors and Marines in quitting tobacco by allowing them, when able, to access tobacco cessation classes and support groups in your local area. Share these tobacco free living resources with your Sailors and Marines so they can access help to quit tobacco.
- Encourage Command Fitness Leaders to demonstrate exercise programming and nutrition basics that reinforce the importance of maintaining a healthy weight.
- Establish a strong command policy on individual and unit-level physical training, and lead by example during command physical training.
- If food is offered at the Command, ensure healthy snacks are readily available.

Leadership can also work with Health Promotion Coordinators and Command Fitness Leaders to:

- Encourage Sailors and Marines to take part in the Daily Heart Health Facts and Tips activity to learn a new tip about heart health each day this month.
- Inform Sailors and Marines about heart disease, and how there are risk factors at any age. Make sure they know the facts about why heart disease is a topic for adults of any age, including young adults.
- Increase awareness about the risk factors and lifestyle choices that could lead to heart disease.
- Ask your command to consider if their lifestyle habits are a recipe for heart disease.
- Inform your command that high blood pressure, elevated low-density lipoprotein (LDL, "bad") cholesterol, large waist circumference, and lack of physical activity are key risk factors for developing heart disease.[1] Sailors and Marines can prevent heart disease by knowing their numbers, and talking to their provider about whether they are at risk.
- Your command can keep their blood pressure levels in check, lowering their risk of serious health problems by eating a nutritious diet low in saturated fats and sodium, taking part in moderate to vigorous physical activity most days of the week, maintaining a healthy weight, drinking less alcohol, and quitting the use of tobacco products, including e-cigarettes.
- Work with your local ShipShape Program Facilitator to promote the official weight management program of the Navy, the ShipShape Program, which helps Sailors make healthy behavior changes in order to lose weight.

References

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[4] Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center EpiData Center Department. Fleet and Marine Corps Health Risk Assessment. http://www.med.navy.mil/sites/nmcphc/health-promotion/Pages/hra.aspx.

[5] Diabetes, Heart Disease, and Stroke. National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), National Institutes of Health (NIH). http://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/health-topics/Diabetes/diabetes-heart-disease-stroke/Pages/index.aspx. Published August 2013.

[6] Preventing Type 2 Diabetes. National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), National Institutes of Health (NIH). http://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/health-topics/Diabetes/type-2-diabetes-taking-steps-lower-your-risk-diabetes/Pages/index.aspx. Published November 2016.