Having a Healthy Heart!

February is “Healthy Heart” month, which means that both you and your children should become more knowledgeable about the risk factors and strategies for preventing heart disease. Heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women in the United States. Certain traits, conditions or habits, called risk factors, may raise the chances of developing heart disease. Most risk factors for heart disease are controllable with things like a healthy diet and physical activity, two things that you and your children have been learning a lot about! Teaching your children about heart healthy habits, and adopting those habits yourself, is a great way to help decrease the risk of developing heart disease.

There are many factors that can increase the risk of developing heart disease. These factors include:

- High cholesterol
- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Poor diet
- Physical inactivity
- Being overweight
- Heredity

Some people see “heredity” on the risk factor list and may believe that there is very little that they can do to prevent heart disease. The truth is that you and your children can take control of your health and should focus on the things that you can control. Two of the most powerful strategies for preventing heart disease are eating a healthy, well balanced diet and being physically active.

Eating for a Healthy Heart!

Maintaining a healthy weight is one of the most important issues when it comes to reducing your and your children’s risk for heart disease. There are many things you can do to help create a more healthy diet for both you and your children. These things include:

- Getting kids involved in cooking healthy meals
- Making a game of reading labels so the entire family can learn what’s good for them
- Being aware of what food choices are being offered to your children, especially at school
- Controlling portion sizes so children are not getting too many extra calories; consult www.mypyramid.gov or www.americanheart.org for calorie and food group recommendations for children
• Serving whole-grain/high-fiber breads, cereals, and other grain products and encouraging kids to have at least half of their daily grain intake come from “whole” grains
• Serving a variety of fruits and vegetables daily, while limiting juice intake
• Making sure each meal includes at least one fruit or vegetable
• Choosing lean meats, poultry and fish and preparing them without added fats
• Serving fat-free or low-fat dairy foods
• Cutting back on beverages and foods with added sugar

Keep Moving!
Physical activity is great for the heart because it makes it work harder than usual. The heart is a muscle, just like others in the body, and benefits from being used frequently. Regular “aerobic” exercise, that which steadily works both the arms and legs, conditions the heart to pump blood through the whole body! To benefit from aerobic exercise, your children should be getting thirty to sixty minutes of moderately intense aerobic activity on most days of the week. Here are some suggestions for making it easier for your children to be active:

• Have comfortable clothing and shoes available at all times
• Start slowly and gradually increase your children’s amount and intensity of activity
• Make exercise like an appointment, it is something that is scheduled and should rarely be missed
• Make exercise social for your children, get them involved in activity with their friends and family members
• Be sure your children are staying hydrated while being active
• Help your children log their physical activity so they can see their progress
• Engage your children in a variety of activities to keep their interest in being active
• Look for chances during the day to be more active with your children, even when you are shopping or doing chores
• Make sure you ask your children how they are feeling and remind them to listen to their bodies – if they do not feel well they should rest instead of being active

You can set a positive example for your children if you focus on eating well and being active, and engage your children in those behaviors. By doing these things you will be helping your children to prevent heart disease early!