

Paying attention to heart health



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Each year during February, we take time to recognize Heart Health Month and focus on cardiovascular health. Although we highlight the topic during that month, we must be diligent to make sure it remains a health focus throughout the rest of the year, as well.

The human heart is one of the body's most essential organs. If we are not careful, we can get busy or distracted and take the steady beat in our chest for granted. The normal pumping of blood and oxygen circulating within our system becomes so routine that we can lose motivation to adopt and maintain healthy behaviors.

Unfortunately, when this happens, we ignore the risk and forget the importance of a healthy heart. Some symptoms of an unhealthy heart that may signal trouble include:

- Chest discomfort
- Nausea, indigestion or heartburn
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Fatigue
- Sweating
- Swelling in the legs or feet
- Shortness of breath

Remember, this is not an inclusive list. If you are experiencing any of these symptoms or have additional concerns, please seek medical help.

During a recent meeting between the American Heart Association and our Health Benefit Plan employees, we were once again reminded that cardiovascular disease remains the No. 1 killer disease in the country. The good news is that you can take preventive measures.

In support of you and your heart, let's discuss steps you can take on your journey to heart health. First, please quit smoking; second, take the time to know your numbers; finally, strive for a healthy weight and lifestyle.

Although quitting a smoking habit can be tough, the long-term health effects from years of nicotine can be far worse. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, each year, nearly half a million Americans die prematurely of smoking or exposure to secondhand smoke; 16 million more live with a serious illness caused by smoking. In addition, each year the country spends nearly \$170 billion on medical care to treat smoking-related disease in adults.

If you are familiar with our Health Benefit Plan, you will know that we can help. No matter which plan you are enrolled in—High Option, Consumer Driven (CDHP) or Value Option—we want to assist you with taking a step toward a healthier you.

Not only are the Plan's tobacco-cessation programs cost-free, you also can earn health savings rewards for participation. Each program includes telephonic counseling sessions, online tools and over-the-counter nicotine replacement therapy.

If you are enrolled in the High Option plan and want more information, you can visit quitnow.net/nalc or call 866-784-8454. If you are enrolled in the CDHP or Value Option Plan, you can visit mycigna.com or call 855-246-1873.

Next, knowing your numbers is critical. High blood pressure or hypertension occurs when the blood flowing through the arteries is too forceful and creates higher-than-normal pressure. Often, individuals will not recognize or experience symptoms, which can lead to severe health complications over time. I implore you: Please know and understand what your blood pressure numbers are telling you.

Other numbers to be mindful of are weight, blood cholesterol and blood sugar levels. If you are unsure of where you stand, again, we are here to help.

Included in the Plan's preventive care benefits is an annual biometric screening. A biometric screening is a measurement of important vital statistics. While the biometric screening should not take the place of a regular exam with your primary physician, or cover all health issues, it will highlight risk areas. Some elements included in the exam are:

- Calculation of body mass index (aka BMI)
- Waist circumference measurement
- Total blood cholesterol
- Blood pressure check
- Fasting blood sugar

Like the tobacco-cessation programs, not only is it cost-free under your preventive benefits, but you will receive health savings rewards upon completion.

Finally, make sure to enjoy some physical activity. Many studies recommend at least 30 minutes a day of aerobic exercise. Whether it is a brisk walk in the park, gardening, swimming or cycling, try to get your heart pumping to strengthen your heart and other muscles. Physical activity can also boost your mood and decrease stress, which also works hand in hand with heart health, so it is a win-win.

As always, if you are unsure what physical activity is safe for you, make sure to check with your health care provider.

"What you do today can improve all your tomorrows."—Ralph Marston