February is Heart Health Month and you have likely heard about how diet and exercise can help lower your risk for heart disease.

What you may not be aware of is that practicing **Gratitude** also provides benefits not only to mental wellbeing, but also to physical health, including your heart.

**Gratitude**

First, let’s understand the concept of gratitude. Certainly, there are times when we are thankful for something: a gift, a favor from a friend, a beautiful day.

The things we are grateful for vary from person to person and how grateful we feel may ebb and flow over time. In other words, gratitude can be experienced as a temporary state of mind.

People who perceive gratitude as a permanent trait, however, as part of an outlook that involves noticing and appreciating what is meaningful in one’s life, tend to have better health habits and outcomes, according to recent research.

According to University of California-Davis psychology professor Robert Emmons, “Grateful people take better care of themselves and engage in more protective health behavior like regular exercise, a healthy diet, and regular health examinations.”
How Else Can Gratitude Improve Health?

It can help better manage stress, for one thing. Learning how to focus on the positive can help people cope with daily problems. Another benefit is an improved immune system. Research has shown that grateful people tend to be more optimistic, a characteristic that boosts the immune system.

Additional health benefits experienced by those who practice gratitude include better quality sleep and overall resilience. Researchers observed that several biomarkers for cardiac health improved among patients who practiced gratitude.

So Who Tends to Practice Gratitude?

Scientists have looked at various populations to see who is most likely to experience gratitude. Surprisingly, it is not necessarily the very rich, or the very poor. People who have overcome losses or adversity early in life tend to be most grateful. Gratitude is also embedded in spirituality, and for many, an integral part of religion or worship. However, anyone can take steps to cultivate feelings of gratitude.

- Maintain a gratitude journal and note at least three things each day that you are grateful for. This can include anything from a beautiful sunrise, to a beloved pet, to the officer who didn’t pull you over for speeding.
- Say thank you to friends, co-workers, the stranger who holds a door open. Saying thank you not only helps you be mindful of the good things that come your way, it can help strengthen relationships, which is beneficial in itself.
- Change your perspective. Reframe a situation by looking at it with a different, more positive attitude. For example, an “obnoxious” co-worker may be “passionate” or “enthusiastic,” characteristics that are easier to appreciate.

If you are looking for ways to lower your stress, boost your immunity and improve your overall wellbeing, try practicing gratitude throughout your day. You’ll be glad you did.

Pat’s Pointers

Valentine’s day and chocolate go hand in hand. Although chocolate is high in calories, sugar and fat, there’s some good news about its heart health benefits. Chocolate comes from the cocoa bean and is a plant derivative, although calling chocolate a vegetable is stretching it. Chocolate has antioxidants and is rich in flavonoids, helping to reduce the risk of blood clots and heart disease. Dark chocolate contains much more cocoa and is the best source of flavonoids.

With chocolate, it’s best to keep in mind that less is more, and just because a little is good for you doesn’t mean that a box of chocolates is even better for you. Chocolate covered raisins or cherries are fine in moderation, but do not count as a serving of fruit. Along with the healthy components of chocolate we also get calories, lots of calories. A cup of spinach has about 25 calories and the same amount of chocolate has about 1000 calories. The key to heart health is also exercise and a balanced diet including several servings of fruits and vegetables.
INDULGING IN AN OUNCE OR TWO A DAY OF DARK CHOCOLATE IS GOOD FOR YOUR HEART!

The Cleveland Clinic website lists the following benefits of dark chocolate:

**Flavonoids** help protect plants from environmental toxins and help repair damage. They can be found in a variety of foods, such as fruits and vegetables. When we eat foods rich in flavonoids, it appears that we also benefit from this "antioxidant" power.

**Antioxidants** are believed to help the body's cells resist damage caused by free radicals that are formed by normal bodily processes, such as breathing, and from environmental contaminants, like cigarette smoke. If your body does not have enough antioxidants to combat the amount of oxidation that occurs, it can become damaged by free radicals. For example, an increase in oxidation can cause low-density lipoprotein (LDL), also known as "bad" cholesterol, to form plaque on the artery walls.

**Flavanols** are the main type of flavonoid found in cocoa and chocolate. In addition to having antioxidant qualities, research shows that flavanols have other potential influences on vascular health, such as lowering blood pressure, improving blood flow to the brain and heart, and making blood platelets less sticky and able to clot.

These plant chemicals aren’t only found in chocolate. In fact, a wide variety of foods and beverages are rich in flavonols. These include cranberries, apples, peanuts, onions, tea and red wine.

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**Preventive Care**

Everyone needs an ounce of prevention.

Preventive health care can help you stay healthier throughout your life.

Click [HERE](#) to learn more about recommendations for preventive care.

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**Chocolate Soufflé Cake**

This incredible chocolate cake tastes so indulgent, it's hard to believe it weighs in at just over 200 calories and 6 grams of fat per serving!

Click [Here](#) to visit Cooking Light's Dark Chocolate Soufflé Cake recipe.

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