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The Valentine's Day holiday on February 14 makes most of us think about hearts, flowers, and candy. This year, I'd like to challenge you to get your patients thinking about their own hearts.

The importance of good heart health cannot be over emphasized. Heart disease is the leading cause of death in Indiana, killing 14,618 Hoosiers in 2004. And we are not alone. According to the American Heart Association, cardiovascular diseases, including stroke, are our nation's number one killer. That's why each year the U.S. Congress requires the President to proclaim February as American Heart Month to increase awareness of heart disease and to help promote ways for individuals to protect and improve their heart health.

The key to better heart health is to have the information needed to make small, positive changes each day that can yield big improvements. It's important for all Hoosiers to know their numbers: LDL, HDL, blood pressure, fasting glucose, body mass index (BMI), and waist circumference. Based on these numbers, you can work with your patients to set goals that are SMART – Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely.

Once you and your patients have set these goals, you can encourage your patient through educating him or her about a heart healthy diet, regular exercise, and avoiding tobacco. A great resource for tips and activities is www.inshape.IN.gov.

On the INShape Indiana Web site, Hoosiers can find suggestions on healthy, low-fat substitutions for more fattening foods as well as information on how many calories are burned doing activities like walking, bicycling, or playing tennis. They can also sign up for the 10 in 10 Challenge and lose 10 pounds in 10 weeks. Even if they don't need to lose 10 pounds, your patients can benefit from the healthy tips and fun activities offered by the Challenge. Finally, INShape Indiana can connect your patients with resources to help them quit smoking.

And, as they say, laughter is the best medicine. A University of Maryland Medical Center study by cardiologists reports that as little as 15 minutes of laughter has been shown to be good for the vascular system. In fact, it can increase blood flow by 22 percent! Laughter appears to cause the tissue that forms the inner lining of blood vessels, the endothelium, to dilate or expand in order to increase blood flow. Conversely, depression and frequent displays of anger have been shown to worsen heart health. In the same study, blood flow decreased an average of 35 percent during mental stress.

So, tell your patients to be good to their hearts. Suggest that instead of buying that special someone chocolate for Valentine's Day, make a date to take a brisk walk and share a laugh. After all, the best gift we can give our loved ones is a healthy heart.

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