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Strategies to Improve Heart Health

Kristin Bogdonas, Food and Nutrition Educator

Kindness is more than a simple act—it's a heart-healthy habit. A study in the Journal of Social Psychology found that performing acts of kindness for seven days significantly boosted happiness. Whether it's being kind to yourself, a friend, or a stranger—or simply witnessing kindness—these actions elevate mood and create a ripple effect of positivity.

Kindness has many forms, but the purest requires no expectation of return. Challenge yourself to a 7-day Kindness Intervention: Do one kind act daily and notice the physical and emotional impact.

Ideas include:

- Help a neighbor with yard work.
- Pick up trash around your neighborhood.
- Offering help to someone in need.
- Bringing food to an animal shelter.
- Donating food or funds to a local food pantry.
- Writing a positive review for a local business.
- Sending flowers to brighten someone's day.
- Tell your family and friends you love them.



Remember to pair kindness with heart-healthy habits like balanced eating and staying active because 80% of heart disease cases are preventable!

Looking for more heart-healthy foods to fill your meals?

Here are three heart-healthy tips:

1. Go lean with protein Choosing lean meat will lower the amount of saturated fat being consumed. Aim for at least 90% lean for ground beef and choose leaner cuts, like sirloin or chuck roast. Other lean protein sources include fish, chicken, turkey, eggs, and plant sources, like nuts and seeds.

2. Lower your sodium intake To help lower sodium intake, look for lower sodium items and words like "no salt added," "reduced sodium," or "sodium free" on canned and packaged foods. If you cannot find lower sodium canned items, you can rinse them under running water to help wash some of the salt away. When cooking food at home, try to use more herbs and spices instead of salt.

3. Switch to unsaturated fats Try to limit saturated fats, which are solid at room temperature, like coconut oil, shortening, and lard. Fish, avocados, olives, nuts, and seeds are good sources of unsaturated fats.

February learning opportunities to beat the winter chill

While the temperatures outside are frigid, Illinois Extension has a full lineup of indoor programs to keep your mind active and your curiosity growing. February is packed with webinars, workshops, and special events designed to help you learn something new, connect with others, and stay inspired all month long.



Tree Care Webinar series:

Dates and Topics: (sessions run from 9 - 11 AM):

Feb 10 Changing Climate and Historic Pets

The first part will cover how climate change is affecting tree health, species performance, and urban canopy resilience. Then learn about historic forest pest outbreaks in North America—including recent threats like emerald ash borer—as you explore past and present challenges to forest health.

Feb 17: Tree Care and Management

The first part will cover best practices for tree care following planting, ensuring that newly planted trees thrive, and clients are satisfied. Then, explore how trees react to pruning, planting, and environmental stress.

Cost is \$10 session or \$50 for those seeking CEUs.

Register at: go.illinois.edu/TreeCareFeb

Feb 10, 10 AM: What's in My Food? Decoding Chemicals and Safety

Ever wonder what's really in your food? This session breaks down natural and artificial food chemicals to help you make informed choices.

Register at go.illinois.edu/FoodChem

Feb 10, 1:30 PM: Four Seasons Gardening: Creating Simply Lovely Nature Art

Learn how to craft a nature-inspired living heart using freshly cut willow. Add rustic romance to bouquets and create a piece that celebrates the beauty of winter.

Register at go.illinois.edu/FourSeasons

Feb 12 – Propagating Houseplants Workshop

1-3 p.m. | Milan Extension

Join Horticulture Educator Emily Swihart for a hands-on workshop on houseplant propagation. Learn simple techniques to multiply your favorite plants, then practice those methods and take home the plants you start in class. Cost: \$15, all supplies included

Register: go.illinois.edu/Botanical

Sat. Feb 21, Nursery School: Lessons in Gardening| 8 AM - 3 PM | Vibrant Arena, Moline

Join University of Illinois Extension educators, local experts, and Master Gardeners for a full day of inspiration, practical workshops, and community connection. Whether you're new to gardening or have years of experience, you'll discover fresh ideas, practical tips, and expert strategies to enrich your gardening journey.

The day begins and ends with keynote sessions: Growing Resilience in the Urban Forest, and Plants of Concern, with your choice of two breakout sessions from six engaging topics in between. Enjoy morning rolls and coffee, a complimentary lunch buffet, time to browse local garden vendors, and a prize drawing to close the day.

Register by Feb. 15: go.illinois.edu/NurserySchool2026

Sat., Feb 21, 5-7PM: Mercer County 4-H Soup Dinner, Aledo Fire Department

Warm up with delicious soups prepared by Mercer County 4-H clubs. Sample a variety of soups, then enjoy a full serving of your favorite. Meals are by donation, with all proceeds supporting Mercer County 4-H programs. We hope to see you there!

Details at go.illinois.edu/Mercer4-HSoup

Tues; March 10, 6-8 PM: Legacy and Law: Navigating Farm Succession, Cernos Bar and Grill, Kewanee, IL

Join University of Illinois Extension and the Henry County Farm Bureau for a practical session on farm succession and the legal considerations that support a smooth transition across generations. Commercial Agriculture Specialist Meagan Diss will share guidance, resources, and introduce attorneys who focus on farm succession planning. Participants will gain clarity on key decisions, common pitfalls, and strategies to protect their family, land, and long-term legacy. A taco buffet will be served.

Register at go.illinois.edu/Legacy_Law

BREAKROOM BUZZ

February 2026



Snack Smarter This February

February is National Snack Food Month, so let's make those snacks work for you.

- **Calories matter.** When choosing your snacks, aim for 100-200 calories if you're maintaining or losing weight. Strive for 200-400 calories if you're very active or trying to gain weight.
- **Mix in the five food groups.** Low on fruits or veggies? Pair them with peanut butter, yogurt, or hummus for staying power.

- **Drink first.** Afternoon slump? Try a glass of water before reaching for a snack. Thirst often feels like hunger.
- **Check the label.** Choose snacks lower in saturated fat, sodium, and added sugar, and higher in fiber and protein to help you stay full longer.

Cranberry Turkey Meatballs

Ingredients:

- 1 pound 93% lean ground turkey
- 1 (14 ounces) can of cranberry sauce
- ½ cup barbecue sauce
- 1 egg, beaten
- ¼ cup whole wheat breadcrumbs
- 2 green onions, chopped
- 1 teaspoon low-sodium soy sauce
- Cracked black pepper to taste

Nutrition information per serving:
132 calories; 3 g fat (0.62 g saturated); 30 mg cholesterol; 17 g carbohydrates; 0 g dietary fiber; 9 g protein; 155 mg sodium.

Servings: 12

Directions: (2-3 meatballs per person)

1. Wash hands with soap and water.
2. Combine ground turkey, egg, green onions, soy sauce, black pepper, and breadcrumbs in a medium bowl, mixing well.
3. Shape into 24 meatballs. Wash hands after handling raw meat.
4. Spray a large skillet with cooking spray and cook turkey meatballs over medium heat. Turn once after they brown on one side, then continue cooking for another 5 minutes or until lightly browned.
5. Heat cranberry and barbecue sauces in a medium saucepan until well mixed.
6. Pour over turkey meatballs, cover, and simmer 10 minutes or until meatballs reach an internal temperature of 165 F.

I Didn't Know That!

According to the American Heart Association, more than 23,000 children experience cardiac arrest outside the hospital each year. Cardiovascular disease remains the leading cause of death in the United States.

Living a heart-healthy life involves more than eating well and exercising. Small daily habits can make a big difference.

Consider these tips for a healthier lifestyle:

- **Be grateful:** Write down one or two things you are thankful for each day.
- **Quit tobacco use:** Set a quit date, choose a method, seek professional help if needed, and plan ways to manage cravings.
- **Get quality sleep:** Maintain a regular schedule, limit blue light exposure, watch caffeine intake, and create a dark, cool, comfortable sleep environment.
- **Manage stress:** Practice relaxation techniques such as mindfulness or meditation to maintain a sense of calm.
- **Connect socially:** Spend time with friends and family who encourage positive habits and support your wellbeing.

Resource: American Heart Association, heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-lifestyle