

## Senior heart health tips

The National Institute on Aging says people age 65 and older are at a higher risk for heart attack, stroke, coronary artery disease and heart failure. February – American Heart Month - is the perfect time for people 65+ and their caregivers to arm themselves with the information and supplies needed to keep their heart healthy.

[Karen Whitehorn, MD](#), is an internal medicine physician at OSF HealthCare. Of the many risk factors for heart issues in older people, she points to blood pressure as a big one to watch. Dr. Whitehorn says a healthy blood pressure reading is 130/80 and below.

“If you’re on medication, take your medicine every day,” to keep your blood pressure normal, Dr. Whitehorn says. “Exercise and eat healthy. You want a diet that’s low in sodium and processed food. You want fruits, vegetables, fresh whole grains and lean proteins like turkey, chicken and lean pork.”

An annual physical exam is critical, too.

On exercise, Dr. Whitehorn admits mobility may be an issue for older people. She recommends checking with a health care provider like a physical therapist to see what exercises are right for you. Some workouts can be done sitting down. Low-impact cardio like walking is an option.

“But if any exercises hurt, don’t do them,” Dr. Whitehorn warns. “If you walk too far and you’re having pain, stop walking. You might not want to walk every single day.”

Dr. Whitehorn says if you have high blood pressure, check it at least once a day at home. Ask your health care provider what type of home blood pressure kit is best. If you don’t have high blood pressure, check it every six months. Your provider should also check your blood pressure when you have an appointment. But Dr. Whitehorn says don’t worry if that reading is a little high.

“People get nervous just seeing the doctor. They’re already a little upset because they have to come to the doctor,” Dr. Whitehorn says of the phenomenon known as white coat syndrome. “So when you take their blood pressure, it goes up. Normally, the nurse takes the blood pressure first. Then, after the person has been resting for a while, the doctor takes it again. It usually comes down.”

Other symptoms of heart issues include shortness of breath, chest pain and dizziness. Someone experiencing a heart attack might suffer nausea and neck, arm or shoulder pain. If you experience these symptoms, call 9-1-1 right away.

Your doctor may order a stress test to get a better idea if your symptoms are indeed due to a heart problem. Dr. Whitehorn says one type of stress test puts you on a treadmill while your heart rhythm is monitored.

“If the rhythm is abnormal, it might indicate there’s a problem with your heart,” Dr. Whitehorn says.

For people who can’t tolerate walking or jogging on a treadmill, there is medicine to safely increase their heart rate while a health care provider monitors.

If the results of the stress test warrant further examination, a doctor will perform a cardiac catheterization. They will insert a catheter, usually through the groin, and send it up to your heart to

take images using contrast dye. This will show if any of your arteries are narrow and what steps the provider will take next, short term and long term.

Learn more about heart care on the [OSF HealthCare website](#).