

News from the Wyoming Department of Health

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Keep Your Heart on the Job February is American Heart Month

The lifestyle choices we make everyday can help or hurt our heart's ability to do its job effectively, according to Wyoming's state health officer.

"Cardiovascular disease is a serious problem in Wyoming and across the nation," said Dr. Wendy Braund, state health officer and senior administrator of the Wyoming Department of Health's public health division. In 2009 heart disease was the top cause of death in Wyoming with 937 deaths.

"Understanding the heart's 'job' can help us appreciate why certain choices can be so potentially harmful to our health," Braund said.

Braund said a heart is about the size of a fist and is one of the hardest working muscles in the body. "During an average life span, the heart beats about two and a half billion times without ever taking a break," she said. "That's quite a career."

"So what does your heart really do for you? Hearts move our blood throughout our bodies," Braund said. "Our blood must keep moving to deliver oxygen from our lungs to our body tissues." Blood also carries harmful waste to the kidneys to be removed, transports hormones from our glands to various parts of our bodies and delivers vitamins and nutrients from our digestive tracts.

The average adult has roughly five liters of blood flowing through the body. "When blood vessels become more narrow and stiff due to a build up of plaque caused by cholesterol and fat, our hearts are forced to work harder to keep blood flowing around the body. It becomes a matter of harmful high blood pressure," Braund said.

"Diet and our personal activity level are certainly primary causes of this trouble with our blood vessels," Braund said. "In addition, smoking harms our hearts by speeding up the process of hardening the arteries. Excessive alcohol use can also make the heart work harder than it should."

Braund offered some simple keys to keeping hearts pumping:

- *Eating healthier foods and avoiding choices that are high in sodium and fat.
- *Maintaining an active lifestyle with plenty of exercise.
- *Avoiding the use of tobacco products.
- *Avoiding long-term excessive use of alcohol.
- *Listen to the treatment advice offered by medical professionals if high blood pressure or high cholesterol is identified.

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