



HURLEY IN THE MORNING > PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Living Heart Healthy in 2026

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FEATURED PHYSICIAN

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Harry Hurley

It's my pleasure to welcome back Dr. Sheena Rastogi, an outstanding cardiologist at Deborah Heart and Lung Center. Dr. Rastogi is board certified in cardiology and internal medicine. She earned her medical degree and completed her residency in internal medicine at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School in Newark, New Jersey, before completing a fellowship in cardiology at Northwell Health's North Shore University Hospital in New Hyde Park, New York.

Her clinical interests include clinical cardiology, echocardiography, and nuclear cardiology, and she has participated in numerous clinical research projects. Dr. Rastogi, welcome back.

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

Thank you so much for having me.

Harry Hurley

It's always great to have you with us. Our topic today is Living Heart Healthy in 2026. Every New Year, people make resolutions to lose weight, exercise more, stop smoking, or adopt healthier habits. What's the best way for someone to begin a genuine journey toward better heart health?

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

When we talk about heart health, we're really talking about reducing the risk of heart attack, stroke, and heart failure while improving overall health and energy. One of the best frameworks for improving cardiovascular health is the American Heart Association's Life's Essential 8, which includes:

- Eating a healthy diet
- Staying physically active

- Avoiding nicotine
- Getting quality sleep
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Managing blood pressure
- Managing cholesterol
- Managing blood sugar

The more of these healthy habits you maintain, the lower your long-term risk of cardiovascular disease.

The key is not trying to change everything at once. Instead, focus on one or two realistic, sustainable goals. For example, commit to walking for 20 minutes after dinner three days a week or replacing soda with water during the week. Small, consistent changes are much more likely to become lifelong habits than dramatic lifestyle overhauls.

Harry Hurley

That's such an important point. People often set goals that are so ambitious they're almost impossible to achieve, which can lead to disappointment. It's much better to establish realistic habits that you can maintain over time.

Years ago, I made one simple decision: I stopped drinking soda. I wasn't drinking huge amounts, but I decided to eliminate it completely. Within a short time, I lost about five pounds, and eventually I didn't even miss it. Today, I don't crave it at all. That one manageable change made a lasting difference.

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

Exactly. That's the perfect example of how small, sustainable habits can lead to meaningful long-term health benefits. That's what I hope people focus on in 2026.

Harry Hurley

Another habit that has a tremendous impact on heart health is smoking. I lost both of my parents to smoking-related illness, so this is a subject that's very personal to me.

How does smoking affect the cardiovascular system? And while we're at it, let's talk about vaping, since many people mistakenly believe it's a safer alternative.

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

I'm very sorry to hear about your parents. Smoking damages the heart and blood vessels in many ways. It significantly increases the risk of heart disease, stroke, lung cancer, and many other serious health conditions.

Cigarette smoke contains hundreds of harmful chemicals that irritate the lining of the arteries. When those blood vessels become damaged, cholesterol is more likely to stick to

the artery walls, leading to plaque buildup. Smoking also raises blood pressure and makes the blood more prone to clotting.

Overall, smokers have approximately two to four times the risk of developing heart disease or suffering a stroke compared with non-smokers.

Vaping is often perceived as a safer option, but it is far from harmless. E-cigarettes deliver nicotine along with ultrafine particles and other substances that can negatively affect blood vessel function, blood pressure, and even heart rhythm.

Harry Hurley

There's also a condition commonly referred to as "popcorn lung" that's associated with vaping, correct?

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

Yes. Vaping can cause significant lung injury. In fact, there are well-documented medical cases showing severe damage to the lungs caused by e-cigarette use. Anyone who believes vaping is harmless should understand that it carries real and potentially serious health risks.

Harry Hurley

We're visiting with Dr. Sheena Rastogi, cardiologist at Deborah Heart and Lung Center. If you're experiencing symptoms or have concerns about your heart health, don't ignore them. Schedule an appointment with Deborah Heart and Lung Center by calling 609-621-2080 or visiting DemandDeborah.org.

Let's talk about another major health issue affecting so many Americans: excess weight. What are the cardiovascular risks associated with obesity, and why is maintaining a healthy weight so important?

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

Excess weight places significant strain on the heart and increases the likelihood of developing high blood pressure, high cholesterol, Type 2 diabetes, and sleep apnea. Each of these conditions independently raises the risk of heart attack, stroke, and heart failure. Obesity also contributes to chronic inflammation and insulin resistance, both of which accelerate plaque buildup inside the arteries.

The encouraging news is that even modest weight loss can produce meaningful health benefits. Losing just 5% to 10% of your body weight can improve blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol levels, and overall cardiovascular risk.

Again, the focus should be on sustainable habits — eating a balanced diet, increasing physical activity, getting adequate sleep, and managing stress. Crash diets rarely produce

lasting results. Some individuals may also benefit from structured weight management programs, and those are conversations worth having with your healthcare provider.

Harry Hurley

Dr. Rastogi, many people hear the phrase "heart-healthy diet," but what does that really mean? What foods should people be eating, and how does a healthy diet benefit the heart?

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

A heart-healthy diet focuses on overall eating patterns rather than any single "superfood." The eating plan with the strongest evidence for improving cardiovascular health is the Mediterranean diet. This approach emphasizes:

- Vegetables and fruits
- Whole grains
- Legumes
- Nuts and seeds
- Healthy fats, such as olive oil and avocados
- Fish and lean sources of protein in moderation

At the same time, it's important to limit processed meats, sugary beverages, refined carbohydrates, and foods high in sodium.

Following a Mediterranean-style diet can lower LDL, or "bad," cholesterol, improve blood pressure, stabilize blood sugar, and reduce inflammation throughout the body. Over time, these changes significantly lower the risk of heart attack and stroke.

The goal isn't perfection. It's making practical, sustainable food choices that support long-term heart health.

Harry Hurley

Let's talk about alcohol, because this is another area where people receive mixed messages. Can reducing alcohol consumption improve heart health?

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

Yes, and this is an important topic because recommendations have evolved over time. Years ago, some studies suggested that moderate alcohol consumption — particularly red wine — might provide cardiovascular benefits because of its antioxidants. However, more recent research has shown that once other lifestyle and genetic factors are considered, those benefits become much smaller or disappear altogether.

We know that excessive alcohol consumption raises blood pressure, contributes to weight gain, increases the risk of atrial fibrillation, and can lead to cardiomyopathy, a disease that weakens the heart muscle. It also increases the risk of stroke.

Reducing alcohol intake can improve blood pressure, support healthy weight management, improve sleep quality, and lower the risk of abnormal heart rhythms. Current recommendations suggest that women consume no more than one standard drink per day and men no more than two. Even so, less alcohol is generally better for overall cardiovascular health.

Harry Hurley

I tend to like the "zero" category myself, but moderation is certainly a much more achievable goal for many people than complete abstinence.

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

Exactly. Moderation is the key. Enjoying an occasional drink socially is very different from making alcohol part of your daily routine.

Harry Hurley

Before the break, we received a question from one of our listeners.

He recently learned that he has a heart murmur. He's 63 years old, has no chest pain or shortness of breath, walks three miles every day, and feels perfectly healthy. His brothers have also had heart murmurs throughout their lives. He wants to know what a heart murmur actually means and whether it's something he should be concerned about.

Harry Hurley

Welcome back. We're talking with Dr. Sheena Rastogi of Deborah Heart and Lung Center about living heart healthy in 2026. Let's answer our listener's question. What exactly is a heart murmur?

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

A heart murmur is simply an extra sound heard while listening to the heart with a stethoscope. Instead of hearing only the normal "lub-dub" heartbeat, a physician may hear a whooshing sound caused by blood flowing through the heart.

The important thing to understand is that many heart murmurs are completely harmless. These are known as innocent or physiologic murmurs and are commonly found in children, athletes, and even during pregnancy. In these cases, the murmur doesn't indicate heart disease.

However, a heart murmur can sometimes signal an underlying problem, particularly if it's accompanied by symptoms such as:

- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Fainting
- Leg swelling

In those situations, the murmur may indicate a heart valve that has become narrowed or leaky or another structural issue affecting blood flow through the heart.

When we need more information, the next step is usually an echocardiogram, which is simply an ultrasound of the heart. It's painless, doesn't involve radiation, and provides detailed information about the heart's structure and function.

The key takeaway is that hearing you have a heart murmur isn't a reason to panic. Many murmurs are completely benign, and those that do require treatment can often be managed very successfully.

Harry Hurley

So having a heart murmur doesn't automatically mean something is seriously wrong.

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

Exactly. The significance of a heart murmur depends on the type of murmur, your symptoms, your medical history, and what your physician hears during the examination. That's why it's important to discuss it with your healthcare provider. Sometimes all that's needed is reassurance. Other times, an echocardiogram can provide additional information and help determine whether any treatment or ongoing monitoring is necessary.

Harry Hurley

If you'd like to schedule an appointment with Deborah Heart and Lung Center, call 609-621-2080 or visit DemandDeborah.org.

Let's move on to exercise. We hear all the time that we should move more, but how much physical activity is actually recommended to maintain a healthy heart?

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

Physical activity is one of the most powerful tools we have for protecting cardiovascular health. Current guidelines recommend at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise each week, such as brisk walking. Alternatively, people can choose 75 minutes of vigorous exercise, such as running or cycling.

In addition, adults should include muscle-strengthening activities at least two days per week.

Regular exercise helps lower blood pressure, improve cholesterol levels, manage body weight, reduce insulin resistance, and decrease inflammation throughout the body. Collectively, these benefits significantly reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease and premature death.

The good news is that exercise doesn't have to be complicated. You don't have to train for a marathon to improve your heart health.

The greatest health benefits occur when someone goes from being largely inactive to becoming consistently active. Even short daily walks can make a meaningful difference.

Harry Hurley

We've talked about the importance of staying active, but if someone has been inactive for years or already has a heart condition, should they speak with their healthcare provider before beginning an exercise program?

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

For most people, incorporating more movement into their daily routine is both safe and beneficial. However, individuals with an existing heart condition — or those experiencing symptoms such as chest pain, shortness of breath, fainting, or significant exercise intolerance — should speak with their healthcare provider before beginning a vigorous exercise program.

Patients with a history of heart attack, heart failure, or heart valve disease may benefit from a supervised exercise program such as cardiac rehabilitation. These programs are designed to help people safely improve their cardiovascular fitness while being monitored by healthcare professionals.

The important message is that physical activity should be tailored to your individual health needs. If you have concerns, talk with your primary care physician or cardiologist before increasing your activity level.

Harry Hurley

Another phrase we hear often is "know your numbers." Which health numbers should people pay attention to, and how often should they be checked?

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

Several measurements play an important role in evaluating cardiovascular health, including:

- Blood pressure
- Cholesterol
- Blood sugar
- Body weight
- Waist circumference

Blood pressure is one of the most important indicators. Ideally, it should be as close to 120/80 mmHg as possible. Cardiovascular risk begins to increase once blood pressure consistently rises above 130/80 mmHg, which is why that number is commonly used as the treatment goal for people with hypertension.

It's important to remember that blood pressure goals aren't always the same for every patient. Factors such as age, kidney disease, heart failure, and overall health may influence what target is most appropriate. Those decisions should always be made in partnership with your healthcare provider.

For otherwise healthy adults, however, aiming for a blood pressure near 120/80 remains an excellent goal.

Harry Hurley

As we get older, is it normal for blood pressure to increase?

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

We do tend to see high blood pressure more frequently with age. There are many reasons for this, including reduced physical activity, lifestyle habits, and changes that naturally occur in the blood vessels over time.

That's one reason why routine monitoring becomes increasingly important as we get older. High blood pressure often develops gradually and may not cause noticeable symptoms until it has already affected the heart or other organs.

Harry Hurley

What about cholesterol? What numbers should people know?

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

The cholesterol number we focus on most is LDL cholesterol, often called the "bad" cholesterol.

For people without known cardiovascular disease, the goal is generally an LDL level below 100 mg/dL. For individuals who already have heart disease, peripheral artery disease, or a history of stroke, we typically aim for much lower LDL levels — often below 70 mg/dL, and in some higher-risk patients, even below 55 mg/dL.

The appropriate goal depends on each person's overall cardiovascular risk, which is why regular discussions with your healthcare provider are so important.

Harry Hurley

Blood sugar is another number we hear about frequently. What should people know?

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

One of the most valuable tests we use is the hemoglobin A1C, which measures your average blood sugar level over the previous two to three months. An A1C level of:

- Below 5.7% is considered normal.
- 5.7% to 6.4% indicates prediabetes.
- 6.5% or higher is consistent with diabetes.

Prediabetes is important because it already increases the risk of cardiovascular disease. Identifying elevated blood sugar early gives patients an opportunity to make lifestyle changes or begin treatment before more serious complications develop.

The A1C is a simple blood test, but it provides valuable information that helps us better understand a patient's overall cardiovascular risk.

Harry Hurley

Many people only schedule a doctor's appointment when they're sick. Why is it important to see your healthcare provider even when you're feeling perfectly well?

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

That's an excellent question because many of the biggest risk factors for heart disease are completely silent.

High blood pressure, high cholesterol, and even diabetes often develop without causing symptoms. A person may feel perfectly healthy while these conditions are quietly increasing the risk of heart attack, stroke, or heart failure.

Preventive visits allow us to identify those risk factors early, before they cause permanent damage. We review your family history, lifestyle, laboratory results, and other health information to determine your overall cardiovascular risk and recommend strategies to reduce it.

These visits also give us the opportunity to discuss topics such as sleep, mental health, nutrition, exercise, and age-appropriate preventive screenings.

Even if you're feeling well, regular preventive care is one of the best investments you can make in your long-term health.

Harry Hurley

Before we wrap up, I'd like to touch on two more important topics: taking medications as prescribed and getting enough quality sleep. Why are both so important for heart health?

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

Taking medications exactly as prescribed is one of the most effective ways to reduce the risk of heart attack, stroke, and other cardiovascular complications. The medications we prescribe have been thoroughly studied in clinical trials and have consistently been shown to improve outcomes.

Depending on the medication, they may help stabilize plaque within the arteries, lower blood pressure, reduce strain on the heart, improve cholesterol levels, or prevent blood clots. Skipping doses or stopping medications without talking to your healthcare provider can increase your long-term risk.

If cost, side effects, or confusion about your medications become a barrier, don't stop taking them on your own. Talk with your cardiologist. In many cases, we can adjust your treatment plan, simplify your medication schedule, recommend alternatives, or help you find financial assistance programs. Our goal isn't to prescribe unnecessary medications. It's to help you lower your long-term cardiovascular risk.

Harry Hurley

That's an important reminder. If something isn't working, have the conversation instead of simply stopping your medication. Let's finish with sleep. We hear more and more about the connection between sleep and overall health. How important is sleep when it comes to protecting the heart?

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

Sleep plays a vital role in cardiovascular health because it's when the body repairs and restores itself. Consistently getting fewer than six hours of sleep each night has been linked to an increased risk of high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Sleep apnea is another condition that's especially important to recognize. During sleep apnea, breathing repeatedly stops and starts throughout the night, causing oxygen levels to drop and placing additional stress on the heart and blood vessels. Over time, untreated sleep apnea increases the risk of high blood pressure, atrial fibrillation, heart failure, and other cardiovascular conditions.

Most adults should aim for seven to nine hours of quality sleep each night. If you snore loudly, wake up feeling exhausted, or have been told that you stop breathing during sleep, it's important to discuss those symptoms with your healthcare provider. Identifying and treating sleep disorders can have a significant impact on your long-term heart health.

Harry Hurley

Dr. Rastogi, this has been another outstanding conversation. You've shared so many practical tips that people can start putting into practice right away as they work toward living a healthier lifestyle in 2026.

If you'd like to schedule an appointment with Dr. Rastogi or another member of the cardiovascular team at Deborah Heart and Lung Center, call 609-621-2080 or visit [DemandDeborah.org](https://demanddeborah.org).

Dr. Rastogi, thank you again for joining us.

Dr. Sheena Rastogi

Thank you so much. It was my pleasure.

Harry Hurley

Our guest has been Dr. Sheena Rastogi, cardiologist at Deborah Heart and Lung Center.
Thanks for listening.