

THE HEART FLEX

Train your most important muscle.

When we talk about working out our muscles, we think of bulging biceps, ripped abs or a sculpted back. But as the old cliché goes, it's what's on the inside that matters—and your heart is the most important muscle of all. The heart never gets a break, even while we sleep, so we need to train it for the physical and physiological stresses we endure in life. Renowned cardiologist Michael Ozner, MD, author of the best-sellers *The Great American Heart Hoax* and *The Miami Mediterranean Diet*, shows how to train the body's most valuable machine.

HOW CAN WE DETERMINE A HEALTHY HEART MUSCLE? HOW CAN WE MEASURE ITS "FITNESS?"

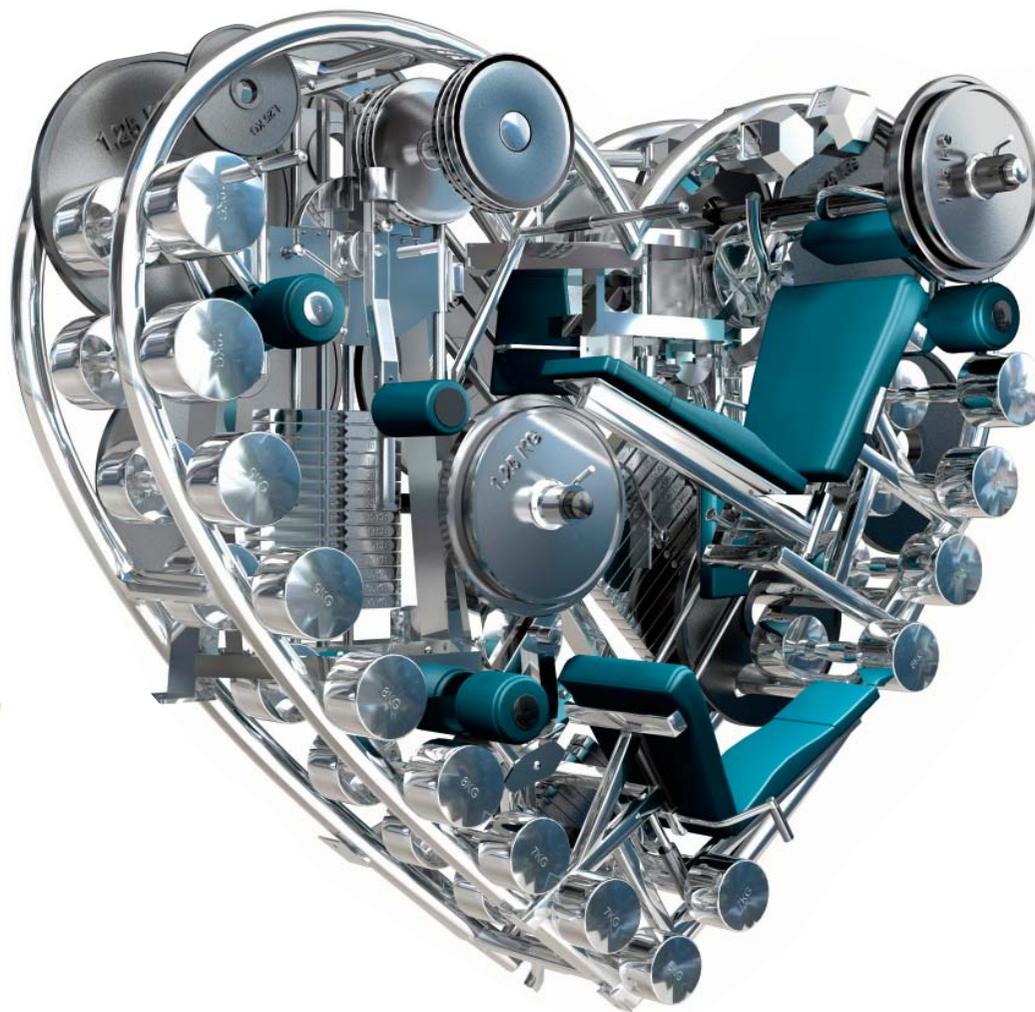
Cardiologists can measure whether or not you have a fit heart, or cardiovascular fitness, by doing a stress test with a standardized treadmill exercise test. Based on your age and the stage of exercise you achieve, we can determine your level of fitness. We can also look at heart function with an echocardiogram and see how the main pumping chamber, the left ventricle, is contracting. **A healthy left ventricle has a normal ejection fraction if it pumps at least 50% of the blood within it each heart beat.** An ejection fraction less than 50% indicates left ventricular dysfunction and the lower the number the more severe is the impairment. Progressive left ventricular dysfunction can eventually lead to congestive heart failure, meaning the heart muscle is no longer strong enough to provide blood flow to the tissues of the body. The need for a stress test is generally left to the judgment of your physician; however, anybody with risk factors for heart disease should see their doctor to consider a stress test prior to embarking on an exercise program.

HOW CAN THE HEART BE "TRAINED"?

Regular aerobic exercise lowers blood pressure and adrenaline levels; improves cholesterol, insulin sensitivity and blood lipids; and increases the production of nitric oxide, which dilates the coronary arteries. All of these factors make it easier for the heart to contract, especially under physical stress, and be a more efficient machine.

HOW MUCH CAN THE HEART BE PUSHED?

We have a built-in burglary alarm system, but people often ignore it. If you develop symptoms such as chest pain, dizziness, fatigue or shortness of breath during exercise, it's your body telling you to stop and slow down. People who push themselves beyond that point get into trouble. Before anybody engages in a training program, they need to be evaluated by their doctor to see if it's safe for them to exercise. If cardiac risk factors are present, a stress test is usually recommended prior to an exercise program.



DOES THE HEART NEED REST?

Yes! Intense prolonged exercise puts certain demands on the heart. If people don't get adequate rest, they can push their heart beyond a point that is healthy or safe. Your heart needs ample time to recover between aerobic activities, and that length of time varies from person to person depending on their aerobic capacity and health. Again, your physician can help you determine how much is too much.

IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WOMEN/MEN WHEN WE TALK ABOUT A HEALTHY HEART?

The No. 1 cause of death in men is cardiovascular disease, heart attack and stroke. The No. 1 cause of death in women is cardiovascular disease, heart attack and stroke. Needless to say, there are not many differences between men and women when it comes to the heart—except the risks for women peak 10 years later than for men, or by the time menopause hits. Women who take birth control pills and smoke put themselves at an even higher risk. **S**

Follow Dr. Ozner's tips to a healthy heart:

- Have periodic visits with your physician to discuss cardiovascular prevention strategies.
- Have blood tests to assess your risk of cardiovascular disease and other disease states.
- If you smoke, stop now.
- Follow a heart-healthy Mediterranean diet and avoid the toxic American diet that is highly processed, calorie-dense and nutrient depleted.
- If starting an exercise program, make sure you see your physician for clearance to exercise. Consider a certified personal trainer to help guide you with your workouts.
- Listen to your body. If you develop symptoms such as chest pain, shortness of breath, dizziness or excessive fatigue while exercising, then STOP and notify your health care provider or call 911.
- Be aware of stress and mental health. Get enough sleep, practice yoga, meditation and breathing exercises.