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Round and Round: Improving Circulation!

February is Heart Month in Canada, an opportunity to learn about cardiovascular health, risk factors, and prevention.

Our heart's primary function is to serve as a powerful pump moving blood throughout the body's circulatory system. When your heart, veins, arteries, capillaries and other blood vessels are healthy, they can provide everything your cells need in an efficient way. It's a continuous cycle of bringing oxygen and other necessities to your cells, and then taking waste away.

However, poor circulation can lead to complications ranging from varicose veins and blood clots to wounds — or even amputation. If you have any concerns about your circulatory health, the place to start is with your healthcare provider, who can deliver a health assessment, guidance, and treatment based on your personal circumstances. While it's important to seek help from a healthcare provider should you experience circulation issues, there are things you can do yourself to help improve blood circulation.

Exercise Regularly

Cardiovascular Exercise: Activities like walking, hiking, swimming, or cycling can improve blood flow and strengthen the heart. According to the *Canadian Physical Activity Guideline*, the objective is to accumulate at least 150 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity per week, in bouts of 10 minutes or more.

Strength Training: Building muscle can also improve circulation, as muscles help pump blood in the body.

Leg Exercises: Specific exercises like leg lifts, ankle pumps, and toe raises targets circulation in the legs.

Eat a Heart-Healthy Diet

Omega-3 Fatty Acids: Found in fatty fish, flaxseed, and walnuts. These foods improve blood flow and reduce inflammation.

Iron-Rich Foods: If you are anemic, iron-rich foods or supplements can help improve blood oxygen levels.

Limit Saturated Fats: Reduce intake of foods high in saturated fats, as they can contribute to plaque buildup in arteries.

Increase Fibre: Fibre is excellent for circulation primarily because it reduces "bad" [Low-Density Lipoprotein \(LDL\) cholesterol](#), lowers blood pressure, and decreases inflammation, all of which keep arteries clear and functional. (Learn more about fibre in this [ReFresh article](#))

Eat protein rich foods: Protein builds and maintains muscles which help with circulation. Eat protein sources such as legumes, nuts, seeds, tofu, shellfish, eggs, poultry, lean red meats, and low fat dairy products.

Manage Underlying Conditions

Diabetes: High blood sugar can damage blood vessels.

High Blood Pressure: High blood pressure can strain the circulatory system.

Obesity: Excess weight puts extra pressure on blood vessels.

Smoking: Smoking damages blood vessels and impairs circulation.

Other Helpful Practices

Compression Socks: These can help improve blood flow in the legs and feet by applying gentle pressure.

Elevate Legs: Raising your legs above your heart level can help drain excess fluid and improve circulation.

Manage Stress: Stress can increase blood pressure, so finding healthy ways to manage stress is important.

Stay Hydrated: Drinking enough water helps ensure blood remains fluid and circulates efficiently.

Consume Less Salt: The number one factor in improving circulation is to cut back on salt. High levels of salt can cause fluid retention, increasing blood pressure and swelling.

Consider Supplements: Certain vitamins and minerals, like B vitamins (B6, B9, and B12), can support healthy blood vessels and circulation.

Seek Medical Advice: If you are experiencing symptoms of poor circulation, such as coldness, numbness, tingling, or pain in your extremities, it is important to consult with a healthcare professional to determine the cause and appropriate treatment plan.

Benefits of Good Circulation

Improving circulation does benefit your overall health by ensuring proper blood flow and oxygen delivery to all parts of the body:

Faster Healing: Improved circulation means that damaged tissues receive more oxygen and nutrients, allowing them to repair themselves more quickly.

Enhanced Brain Function: The brain relies on a constant supply of blood and oxygen to function properly. Improved circulation helps improve focus, memory, and cognitive function. Reduced blood flow may lead to cognitive decline and conditions like vascular dementia.

Heart Health: Good circulation supports a healthy heart by ensuring it receives the oxygen and nutrients it needs to function efficiently. It also helps prevent a buildup of plaque in the arteries which reduces the risk of heart disease.

Skin Health: Healthy circulation can give the skin a healthy, natural flush and appearance. It helps deliver nutrients and oxygen to skin cells, promoting a healthy complexion.

Reduced Swelling: Poor circulation can lead to fluid retention and swelling, especially in the extremities. Improving circulation also helps reduce swelling by efficiently improving the removal of excess fluid.

Other Benefits:

- Reduced risk of blood clots
- Improved immune function
- Decreased risk of chronic illnesses

Recognizing Poor Circulation

How does poor circulation affect my body?

You may feel pain, numbness, tingling, or a cold sensation in the parts of your body with poor circulation. Often, these symptoms affect your legs, hands, fingers, feet, and toes.

What can I expect if I have poor circulation?

Poor circulation won't get better on its own. In fact, it can get worse. But you can manage and improve your poor circulation by seeing your healthcare provider regularly, making lifestyle changes, taking medication, and even by undergoing surgery, where necessary.

Final Thoughts

Ideally, we can avoid circulation concerns by proactively maintaining a healthy heart and circulation system. Even those with a hereditary risk for circulatory issues may be able to mitigate that risk by applying the recommendations above.

Take care of you and help your heart productively pump the blood in your body, round and round...

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Morandini', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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If you would like to contribute or have ideas about what you would like to see in the ReFresh series, we would love to hear from you: contact rochelle@bcpypa.bc.ca.

Sources

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