HEART & SOUL CURRICULUM

SESSION 6:

GUARDING THE HEART

Heart Health



GUARDING THE HEART :

Heart Health

What the heart does and how to support it. The heart is the engine for the body. It pumps blood through your blood vessels and carries oxygen and nutrients to your cells. A healthy heart beats an average of 100,000 times a day. The heart helps to pump waste, such as carbon dioxide, from the body back to the lungs so it can be removed. This is the circle of life, and why the heart is a vital organ. The heart is a muscle made of 4 chambers. These chambers are connected by valves that guide the flow of blood through blood vessels.

The central goal of the Healthy Five and the Heart & Soul Curriculum is to keep the heart muscle, valves, and blood vessels working well and to prevent disease. You can also use these guidelines to help treat or manage disease.

Heart disease is the leading cause of death for all Americans. But we can change that. Remember, what you eat, how often you move, your sleep habits, how you manage stress, and whether you have strong, healthy relationships are the key to heart health and overall wellness.

TIP: Watch this video[4] to learn more about the heart.

Health tools and treatments for heart health. There are also clinical tools and treatments that your doctor or provider may use to keep your heart healthy. This special section will describe the main things you should know to improve your heart health.



NOTE The information, tools, videos, and fact sheets that are part of this session provide important heart health information and medical test details that many in our communities may not know but need to know to keep their hearts healthy.

4. Mayo Clinic. (2013). *The heart and circulatory system - how they work*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWFyxn0qDEU

First, know your numbers!

The four main numbers you should know are your blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol, and weight.

1 Keep your blood pressure around 120/80 mm Hg.

High blood pressure is the leading preventable risk factor for heart disease (also called cardiovascular disease). It can lead to heart attacks, stroke, heart failure, kidney disease, and dementia.

- Nearly half of all adults in the US have high blood pressure (> 130/80 mmHg), also known as hypertension.
- Less than 1 in 4 adults have their high blood pressure under control, and almost 34 million adults need prescription drugs to treat their blood pressure but are not currently taking them.

Health disparities. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more men (50%) than women (42%) have high blood pressure. It is more common in Black adults (59.6%) than in Hispanic adults (44.9%), White adults (44.8%), or Asian adults (42.7%). This is an example of a health disparity.[5] There are social, economic, and health reasons behind why this is true, including the chronic stress of racism and discrimination.

Checking and knowing your blood pressure is the first step in caring for your heart and health. Most people with high blood pressure have no symptoms. Talk with your health care team about how often to check your blood pressure and how to take it correctly.

2 Know your blood sugar. Hemoglobin A1C (HbA1c) below 5.7 is normal.

This test measures your average blood sugar level over the past 2 to 3 months.

- The range of 5.7-6.4 is defined as prediabetes, while 6.5 or higher is defined as diabetes.

Diabetes and high blood pressure. Most people with diabetes (about 6 out of 10) have high blood pressure too.[6] This is why it is important to follow the Healthy Five and practice heart-healthy habits to manage both conditions.

Health disparities. Like with high blood pressure, there are disparities that Black people live with that are unfair. According to the Office of Minority Health, in 2024, Black adults were 24% more likely than U.S. adults overall to have diabetes. And in 2022, Black people died from diabetes 78% more often than the U.S. population overall. [7]

These trends and statistics are not fixed. Learning to care for ourselves, fighting for more doctors who serve our communities with the best care, and learning new skills in places like houses of worship can help create a new reality.

5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2026b, June 2). *High blood pressure facts*. https://www.cdc.gov/high-blood-pressure/data-research/facts-stats/index.html
6. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2026 October 13). *High blood pressure risk factors*. https://www.cdc.gov/high-blood-pressure/risk-factors/index.html
7. U.S. Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health. (n.d.). Diabetes and Black/African Americans. https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/diabetes-and-blackafrican-americans

TIP: Download this American Heart Association action plan to manage both your high blood pressure and diabetes together.

3 Get your cholesterol checked by your health provider.

Specifically, your doctor will monitor your lipids, which carry cholesterol in the blood: HDL (high-density lipoprotein) and LDL (low-density lipoprotein), as well as triglycerides, which the body stores in your fat cells, and total cholesterol levels.

- **HDL:** A heart-healthy range for HDL (known to protect your heart) is 40-80 mg/dL for men and 50-80 mg/dL for women.
- **LDL:** Too much LDL is bad for your heart; keeping it below 100 mg/dL is best for preventing heart disease. If you have diabetes or multiple chronic health conditions (e.g., high blood pressure, chronic kidney disease, smoking history), then your target LDL is below 70 mg/dL; if you have had a heart attack or stroke, then your target LDL is below 55 mg/dL.
- **Triglycerides** are often measured together with your HDL and LDL. A normal level is less than 150 mg/dL. While 150-199 mg/dL is borderline, anything above 200 mg/dL carries a higher risk of heart disease.
- **Total cholesterol** levels should be less than 200 mg/dL. The range of 200-239 mg/dL is borderline, and anything at or above 240 mg/dL is bad for the heart.

Your doctor or health care team will tell you when and how often to test your cholesterol. Your risk factors are tied to your age, sex, and personal and family history.

4 Maintain a healthy weight.

While **BMI, or body mass index**, has been used to set healthy weight goals, we now know it is not always a good tool for everyone. Typically, the standard range is 18.5-24.9, while 25.0-29.9 is defined as overweight and 30 and above are defined as having obesity.

Measuring your belly can be a better way to understand whether your size is tied to health risks. In women, a waist size of 35 inches or more is related to a high risk of heart disease or diabetes. In men, a waist size of 40 inches carries these risks. In general, you are at lower risk if your waist measures less than one-half your height.

Check out the Supporting Healthy Weight & Preventing Obesity learning and action guide for statistics, tools, and heart-healthy tips—including the Healthy Plate and Physical Activity Pyramid.

SEE the **Know Your Numbers!** fact sheet for a quick-reference summary of important health numbers.

Second, ask your health care provider about newer heart tests.

Other tools to prevent heart disease now include:

- **The PREVENT™ heart risk calculation** – Estimates heart health risks using patient data, used in people ages 30–79 without heart disease.
- **Lipoprotein (a) or Lp(a)** – Helps you understand your long-term heart disease risk; people should be tested once, as the levels are determined by your genes and don't change much.
- **Apolipoprotein B or ApoB** – Helps you understand current risk of clogged arteries better than standard LDL cholesterol tests.
- **A coronary calcium scan** – Shows the amount of plaque in a person's arteries for people who don't have heart disease but do have risk factors.

REVIEW the **4 Key Heart Health Tests to Ask Your Doctor About** fact sheet for more information on each test.

Third, practice heart-healthy habits, such as not smoking and limiting alcohol.

Tobacco is the leading preventable cause of death in the US. Tobacco companies have targeted Black communities for decades with harmful actions to promote a culture of smoking, including easily available menthol cigarettes. Newer products in the market, such as vapes, hookahs, and pouches, have also targeted youth and adolescents.

The NAACP and Truth Initiative have come together to fight back with the Breath of Freedom Movement. Join and get access to a lifesaving online EX Program.

And finally, after years of mixed signals, recent research has made it clear that **alcohol** can hurt heart health. Too much alcohol can raise your blood pressure. If you don't drink, then don't start. Every drink of alcohol carries some risk. If you do drink, have no more than 2 drinks per day for men and no more than 1 drink per day for women.



Interactive Activity

Complete the **Heart-Safe Action Plan** with 4 key parts:

1. VIDEO: **How to take your blood pressure at home**[8]
   Watch this video during the session, watch it again at home, and share it with loved ones.
2. Note your current blood pressure and identify another health number you will track.
3. Name one new heart health test to ask your doctor about.
4. For people who have both high blood pressure and diabetes: Download the American Heart Association Action Plan to manage both health conditions.

You can write your action plan in a health journal or book, on paper, in an app, or online. Keep this and all the heart health tools in a go-to spot you can easily find.

Make a commitment to your heart health out loud in the session.

Heart & Soul in Action

There are opportunities to move this learning into collective action.

Actions in your faith community:

- Together, the congregation can create opportunities for members to learn about, monitor, or take action to support their heart health.
  - Examples: Participate in a local heart-health walk together, organize a congregational walk, partner with a local health provider to offer blood pressure screenings, or host a heart-health education event.
- Make the **Know Your Numbers!** and the **4 Key Heart Health Tests to Ask Your Doctor About** fact sheets available to the whole ministry.
- For a fun heart health project, create a heart wall in the church, temple, or mosque where members and participants can put pictures of loved ones and a heart health "I will" statement or goal.

Advocacy for community health: Earlier, we mentioned that racism and discrimination create conditions in our communities that cause chronic stress and can lead to heart disease. Learn how you can change those conditions and advocate for yourself inside and outside the doctor's office with the ACE Your Health Literacy Toolkit.

8. American Heart Association. (2025, August 15). *Monitoring your blood pressure at home*. https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/high-blood-pressure/understanding-blood-pressure-readings/monitoring-your-blood-pressure-at-home

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

Session Overview & Learning Goals

This session helps participants learn the 4 major health numbers they need to know to take charge of their heart health (blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol, and weight)—and that blood pressure control is key to caring for the heart.

You can also help participants identify at least one health number they will track and follow up about with their doctor or health care provider.

This session also teaches participants the names and basic information on the 4 newer tests that measure heart health and risk. And it notes how heart-healthy behaviors like quitting smoking and cutting back on alcohol are important.

By the end of this session, the goal is that participants will:

- Identify the new guidelines for normal blood pressure: 120/80 mmHg.
- Know the 4 health numbers that matter for their heart and overall health.
- Describe, in simple terms, that there are newer tests available for their doctor to measure heart health.
- Be able to name one of these tests and ask their provider about it.
- Identify that both smoking and drinking alcohol can harm the heart.

Facilitator Checklist

Before the session:

- ☐ Review the Guarding the Heart session content, blood pressure video, and facilitator guide.
- ☐ Be able to name the new blood pressure guideline for normal: 120/80 mmHg.
- ☐ Be able to name all 4 health numbers: blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol, and body weight—and describe each in simple terms.
- ☐ Print and pass out the handouts on Heart-Safe Action Plan, Know Your Numbers! and 4 Key Heart Health Tests to Ask Your Doctor About.
    - You may also want to print and hand out the American Heart Association action plan on how to manage high blood pressure and diabetes together.
- ☐ Be able to name 4 new heart health tests: PREVENT™, lipoprotein (a) or Lp(a), apolipoprotein B or ApoB, and coronary calcium scan.
    - You do not need to memorize these facts. Be able to read them by name and have a flip chart to write out the 4 key numbers and names of the 4 heart health tests.
    - Lipoprotein (a) or Lp(a) is spoken "L-p-little a" or "lie-po-pro-teen a."
    - Apolipoprotein B or ApoB is pronounced "Ay-po-lie-po-pro-teen B" or "Ay-po-bee."
- ☐ Be ready to play the video (or direct participants to it) on how to check their blood pressure at home.
- ☐ Share the session announcement with your congregation ahead of time.

Discussion Questions

During the session, you might ask:

- What does heart health mean to you?
- Why is it important to know these four health numbers?
- Do you already track your blood pressure or any of these numbers?
- Has your doctor or health care provider already checked these numbers? Do you know your numbers or levels, or where to find them?
    - Suggest that participants keep a health journal or book (paper, online, or app) to record these numbers and track them themselves.
- Has your doctor or provider ordered or talked with you about any of these 4 newer heart health tests?
    - Suggest that they take their **Heart-Safe Action Plan worksheet** and the **fact sheets** to their next doctor visit and ask whether they need them.
- Did you know that quitting smoking is the main preventable behavior that can save lives?
    - Encourage them to use the digital EX Program tool if they currently smoke or have a loved one who does.
- Did you know that alcohol can be bad for your heart?
    - Encourage them to speak with their doctor about how much they drink and how to cut back if needed.

Interactive Activity

During the session, ask participants to create their **Heart-Safe Action Plan** with 4 key parts. Be sure that you have reviewed the video and handouts before the session.

- To start, WATCH VIDEO: **How to take your blood pressure at home**
- Then, have participants review the **Know Your Numbers!** and **4 Key Heart Health Tests to Ask Your Doctor About** fact sheets to help complete their plan worksheet.
- Introduce the American Heart Association Action Plan for people who are managing both high blood pressure and diabetes.

Suggest that participants write parts of their action plan in a health journal or book (i.e., paper, app, or online) and keep the plan and fact sheets in a go-to spot they can easily check.

At the end of the session, ask participants to speak a commitment sentence out loud, such as:

"I will check my blood pressure on a regular basis to learn what it is and speak with my doctor about it."

Heart & Soul in Action

Let participants know that there are opportunities for this group and faith community to move into deeper learning, personal growth, and collective action on these health topics.

Point out the recommended **action steps** to take in the faith community and the tool for further learning and **community advocacy** to review and consider.

- Together, the congregation can create opportunities for members to learn about, monitor, or take action to support their heart health. This might include taking part in a community event or creating a heart wall in the church, temple, or mosque with an "I will..." heart health statement or goal.
- Make the **Know Your Numbers!** and the **4 Key Heart Health Tests to Ask Your Doctor About** fact sheet handouts available to the whole ministry.
- Use the ACE Your Health Literacy Toolkit to learn about and take action in and out of the doctor's office to change the community and health disparities that come from racism, discrimination, and chronic stress.

Communication Templates

For a Bulletin/Flyer

Guarding Your Heart: Heart Health
Join us for our next Heart & Soul session as we learn how heart health helps us live whole, happy, and healthy lives. Learn about the new blood pressure guidelines and other goals to check your heart health!

[add date, time, location]

For a Weekly Email

Did you know that the average heart beats 100,000 times a day? This week, Heart & Soul is hosting **Guarding the Heart**. Together, we'll talk about heart health and learn heart-healthy steps.

We'll learn about the 4 numbers every person should know to protect their heart, including how to check your blood pressure at home. We'll use videos, worksheets, and fact sheets to help you better understand and follow heart-healthy habits.

And we'll share the latest tools on heart health and how to talk with your doctor about it. Join us and live whole, healthy, and happy lives!

[add date, time, location]

GUARDING THE HEART: HEART HEALTH

KNOW YOUR NUMBERS!

FACT SHEET

Here are the 4 numbers to know:

Blood Pressure: Keep your blood pressure around 120/80 mm Hg.

Talk with your health care team about how often to check your blood pressure and how to take it correctly.

Blood Sugar: Hemoglobin A1C (HbA1c) below 5.7 is normal.

- **Prediabetes:** 5.7 to 6.4
- **Diabetes:** 6.5 or higher

Most people with diabetes have high blood pressure too. Follow the Healthy Five and practice heart-healthy habits to manage both conditions.

Cholesterol: Get your cholesterol checked by your health provider.

- **HDL** (high-density lipoprotein) levels: 40-80 mg/dL for men and 50-80 mg/dL for women.
- **LDL** (low-density lipoprotein) levels:
  - Below 100 mg/dL to prevent heart disease.
  - Below 70 mg/dL if you have diabetes or multiple health conditions.
  - Below 55 mg/dL if you have had a heart attack or stroke.
- **Triglycerides:** The goal is less than 150 mg/dL; 150-199 mg/dL is borderline; above 200 mg/dL carries a higher risk of heart disease.
- **Total cholesterol:** Should be less than 200 mg/dL; 200-239 mg/dL is borderline; above 240 mg/dL is bad for the heart.

Your doctor or health care team will tell you when and how often to test your cholesterol based on your age, sex, and other personal factors.

Weight: Maintain a healthy weight.

- **BMI or body mass index**
  - Standard range: 18.5 to 24.9
  - Overweight: 25.0 to 29.9
  - Obesity: 30+
- **Measuring your belly**
  - In women, a waist size of 35 inches or more is tied to a high risk of heart disease or diabetes.
  - In men, a waist size of 40 inches carries these risks.

GUARDING THE HEART: HEART HEALTH

4 KEY HEART HEALTH TESTS TO ASK YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT

FACT SHEET

1. **PREVENT:** The Predicting Risk of Cardiovascular Disease (PREVENT) calculator by the American Heart Association:

   - Estimates a person's chance of having a heart attack, stroke, or heart failure using information on their cholesterol, blood pressure, and kidney function.
   - Should be used for people aged 30 to 79 without heart disease to guide talks with their doctor about treatments that can lower heart risks.

2. **Lipoprotein(a)** or Lp(a) carries cholesterol through your bloodstream. It is a genetic risk factor that should be tested at least once as an adult.

   - Lp(a) helps you understand your long-term risk of heart disease. High Lp(a) — above 125 nmol/L — is linked to a 1.4-fold increase in having a heart attack or stroke.

3. **Apolipoprotein B** (ApoB) is a type of protein that wraps around fat and cholesterol to help them flow through the bloodstream and clog your arteries.

   - Doctors consider this test better than the regular LDL test for estimating your risk of heart attacks and strokes.
   - If this number is higher than 130 mg/dL, you have a higher risk of heart disease.
   - Providers treat high ApoB the same way as high LDL: lifestyle changes such as more fruits and vegetables, lower saturated fat intake, more physical activity, a healthy weight, quitting smoking, and taking cholesterol-lowering drugs (statins).

4. **Coronary calcium scan:** Your health care team may suggest this scan to see the amount of plaque in the arteries that bring blood to the heart.

   - This special CT scan is only done if you don't have heart disease, but you may have risk factors, and your doctor wants to know whether to start treatments like a statin.
   - A score of zero means no plaque was found in your vessels. Anything above zero suggests plaque in your arteries and a higher future risk of heart disease.

GUARDING THE HEART: HEART HEALTH

HEART-SAFE ACTION PLAN

Fill out this action plan and keep it in your journal, notebook, notes app, or another place you can easily find again.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Know How to Check My Blood Pressure

My Actions:

- ☐ I watched the blood pressure video during the session.
- ☐ I will watch the video again at home.
- ☐ I will share the video with my family or someone who supports me.

Reminder:

When I check my blood pressure at home, I will:

1. Sit quietly for at least 5 minutes.
2. Keep my back supported and both feet flat on the floor.
3. Rest my arm on a flat surface at heart level.
4. Place the cuff on bare skin, above the bend of my elbow.
5. Take at least two readings, one minute apart, and record them.

2. Know One Important Health Number

My Actions:

Know my blood pressure reading today.

My Blood Pressure Reading today:

_____ / _____ mm Hg

Choose one other number to track:

Blood Sugar / A1C
Cholesterol
Body Weight/Belly Size

My Number: _____

3. Ask My Doctor About One Heart Health Test

I want to ask my health care professional about:

- Lipoprotein(a) or Lp(a)
- Apolipoprotein B or ApoB
- Coronary calcium scan
- PREVENT heart risk calculation

Why am I asking about it?

My question(s) for my doctor:

Appointment date:

---

4. Use My Heart & Diabetes Action Plan

- ☐ I downloaded/saved the American Heart Association Action Plan for managing high blood pressure and diabetes.
- ☐ I reviewed it with my health care professional.
- ☐ I will keep it with my other tools.