Announcer: The Missouri State Journal. A weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap: It's a fact: every year, heart disease causes one in four deaths in the United States, making it the country's leading killer. But the good news is that heart disease can be prevented by making healthy lifestyle choices. February is American Heart Month and it's a perfect time to focus on our hearts and see what steps we can take to live healthier. I'm Emily Yeap. Joining me today is Ben Hunt, employee wellness coordinator at Missouri State University. He's here to share the importance of wellness and exercise in protecting heart health.

Ben Hunt: Coronary heart disease tends to be the most common type of heart disease, which results in over 370,000 deaths each year. Another common result of heart disease is heart attacks. There's actually 735,000 heart attacks that occur in the United States each year as a result of heart disease, so it’s extremely prevalent on a national scale. Here locally, heart disease alone is the cause of about 32% of all deaths in Green County. Our local health department released an assessment in 2014 that found heart disease was one of the top five chronic disorders for which emergency room visits were made by Green County residents.

One of the reasons it is so prevalent in the United States and even here locally, is primarily due to a couple of contributing factors. One of those is the things that individuals are consuming on a daily basis and also just the simple lack of activity in our society.

Emily Yeap: According to Hunt, many people who die from heart attacks, particularly those under 65, could have prevented it through healthier lifestyle behaviors. Small changes make a big difference.

Ben Hunt: Some of those tips that I have or effective steps, one is simply to get up, get out, move. Eating a diet rich in whole and nutrient dense foods is very helpful. Not smoking. It's never too late to quit smoking. Your risk of heart attack actually starts to decrease within weeks of quitting smoking. Also, monitoring and aiming to maintain a healthy weight. Understanding your blood pressure and monitoring those numbers are also great steps you can take to prevent heart disease.

Emily Yeap: Hunt has some advice for those who lack the time or interest to participate in wellness and exercise.

Ben Hunt: Determine what motivates you. Is it personal appearance? Is it you want to be around for your grandkids? You want to be able to get outside and move around and still have your breath? And then come up with simple goals and write them down. That's the key step is writing those things down and monitor your progress.

One of the things that really seems to help is also finding accountability partners or telling somebody about your goal. Doing that tends to make people more accountable to reach their goal. Another thing is to identify activities that you enjoy. Staying healthy and exercising doesn't have to be punishment. We should find things that we enjoy. Find foods you like to eat and eat more of them that are healthy. Find exercises and activities that you like and if you say you don't have time for activity, find ways to squeeze it in every day. That could be things like taking the stairs instead of the elevator, walking down the hall to talk with a co-worker versus sending an email or calling. Those are all little ways and things that you can incorporate into your daily routine to help improve your overall health and also reduce your risk of chronic disease.

Emily Yeap: People should also take advantage of employee wellness programs if they have access to one.

Ben Hunt: The core of every good wellness program should focus on behavior change. Our employee wellness program here at Missouri State, we promote heart health by providing employees with the right education, the skills and tools and social support to enable change in their personal behaviors. As a result, those healthy behaviors lead to lower health risks and those lower health risks lead to less cases of chronic disease and with less chronic disease, employees experience fewer health care costs. Just a good example of that is on average, an individual with diabetes incurs about $13,000 worth of medical care costs each year. Close to $8,000 of that is attributed directly to the diabetes care. On the other hand, when you look at a wellness program that can implement a proven diabetes prevention program that can reduce somebody's risk by half, there's programs out there that can be implemented for under $500, so that can be a difference of about $5,000 worth of medical costs for somebody.

Emily Yeap: If you need help to start or enhance wellness programs at your workplace, contact Hunt at 417-836-4064 for support and resources. I'm Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Announcer: For more information, contact the Office of University Communications at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at KSMU.org.