



IN BRIEF:

Your Guide to A Healthy Heart

healthy
heart

If you're like most people, you may think of heart disease as a problem for *other* folks. If you're a woman, you may believe that being female protects you from heart disease. If you're a man, you may believe you're not old enough to have a serious heart condition. Wrong on all counts.

Heart disease is the #1 killer in the United States—of both men and women. It affects many people at midlife as well as in old age. African Americans and Latinos are at especially high risk for heart disease and have high rates of some of the risk factors that lead to heart disease.

The good news is that heart disease is preventable. You can take action to reduce your risk of heart disease by focusing on your lifestyle and habits. This fact sheet gives you steps you can take to protect your heart health. And what's good for you, is good for your whole family. As an adult, you can make lifestyle changes that can set a good example for children who may have already developed habits that can lead to heart disease.

What Is Heart Disease?

Coronary heart disease—often simply called heart disease—occurs when the arteries that supply blood to the heart muscle become hardened and narrowed due to a buildup of plaque on the inner walls of the arteries. A heart attack occurs when the plaque in an artery bursts and a clot forms over the plaque, blocking flow through the artery and preventing oxygen and nutrients from getting to the heart.

Heart disease is a lifelong condition. Once you get it, you'll always have it. But there is much you can do to control the risk factors for heart disease, prevent a heart attack, and increase your chances for a long and vital life.

Risk Factors

Risk factors are health conditions or habits that increase the chances of developing a disease or having it worsen. For heart disease, there are some risk factors that you can't change, but many that you can. You can't change a family history of early heart disease or your age, which for women becomes a risk factor at age 55. Men are at higher risk beginning at age 45.

Every risk factor counts, and if you have more than one, they can “gang up” and worsen each other's effects. But most risk factors can be controlled with changes in lifestyle. Sometimes medication is also needed. Here's a quick review of these risk factors.

Smoking. Smoking leads to reduced blood flow in the arteries. This reduced flow can lead to a heart attack. There's no safe way to smoke. However, the benefits of quitting start immediately. After a few days, your blood pressure will drop and the levels of oxygen and carbon monoxide in the blood can return to normal. Just 1 year after quitting, your heart disease risk will drop by more than half. It's not easy to quit, but make a plan and you can do it. Or try an organized program or medication—ask your doctor if either is right for you.

High blood pressure. Also called hypertension, high blood pressure increases your risk of heart disease, stroke, and congestive heart failure. Even levels slightly above normal—called prehypertension—increase your heart disease risk.



Questions To Ask Your Doctor

1. What is my risk for heart disease?
2. What is my blood pressure? What does it mean for me and what do I need to do about it?
3. What are my cholesterol numbers? (These include total cholesterol, LDL, HDL, and triglycerides—a type of fat found in the blood and food.) What do they mean for me and what do I need to do about them?
4. What are my body mass index (BMI) and waist measurement? Do they mean that I need to lose weight for my health?
5. What is my blood sugar level, and does it mean that I'm at risk for diabetes? If so, what do I need to do about it?
6. What other screening tests do I need to help protect my heart?
7. What can you do to help me quit smoking?
8. How much physical activity do I need to help protect my heart?
9. What's a heart healthy eating plan for me?
10. How can I tell if I'm having a heart attack? If I think I'm having one, what should I do?

There are several ways to get your blood pressure under control. Follow a heart healthy eating plan, reduce your salt and sodium intake, get regular physical activity, and maintain a healthy weight. If you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation—one drink per day for women and two per day for men. Your doctor may also recommend medication to lower your blood pressure.

High blood cholesterol. Excess cholesterol and fat in your blood build up in the walls of the vessels that supply blood to the heart. This buildup, called plaque, can lead to blockages. A lipoprotein profile tests your levels of total cholesterol, low-density lipoprotein (LDL) or “bad” cholesterol, high-density lipoprotein (HDL) or “good” cholesterol, and triglycerides—a fatty substance in the blood.

You can lower your cholesterol by following a heart healthy eating plan, being physically active, maintaining a healthy weight, and, if needed, taking medication.

Overweight/obesity. The high rate of overweight and obesity in our country is no secret. But size isn't the only issue. Excess weight can increase the risk of not only heart disease, but a host of other conditions, such as stroke, gallbladder disease, arthritis, and some cancers. Even a small amount of weight loss (10 percent of your initial weight) will help lower your heart disease risk. If you are overweight, at the very least, try not to gain more weight.

Lasting weight loss requires a change in lifestyle. Adopt a healthy, lower calorie eating plan, and be more physically active. Aim to lose no more than 1/2 pound to 2 pounds per week. If you have a lot of weight to lose, ask your doctor, a registered dietitian, or a qualified nutritionist to help.

Physical inactivity. Even if you have no other risk factors, being physically inactive greatly boosts your chances of developing heart-related problems. But nearly 40 percent of Americans do no spare-time physical activity at all.

Try to do at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most, if not all, days of the week. This includes brisk walking, light weightlifting, or even housecleaning or gardening. If you need to, divide the 30 minutes into shorter periods of at least 10 minutes each.

Diabetes. About 11 million Americans have been diagnosed with diabetes—and another 5.7 million don't know they have it. About two-thirds of those with diabetes die of heart or blood vessel disease.

Diabetes can be detected with a blood sugar test. If you have diabetes, it is vital that you keep it under control. Modest changes in diet and level of physical activity can often prevent or delay the development of diabetes.

Taking Action

The first step to improving your heart health is learning about your risk profile. See the box “Questions To Ask Your Doctor.” Then begin taking the steps to heart health—don't smoke, follow a heart healthy eating plan, be physically active, and maintain a healthy weight. Start today to keep your heart strong.

To Learn More

Contact the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) for information and publications on heart disease and heart health.

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