

TE HEALTH TODAY



CARDIO HEALTH: *Reducing Your Risk of Heart Attack and Stroke*

Your heart beats faithfully for you, one hundred thousand times a day, each and every day, without rest. Be good to your heart. If you nourish and protect it, you can actually double your chances of living a long life, free of cardiovascular disease and heart attack. Heart attacks are the number one cause of death of both men and women in the United States. Stroke, which results from similar risk factors, is the number three killer. Fortunately, you can make choices and changes today that can significantly improve the health of your heart and cardiovascular system and reduce your risk of these deadly and debilitating diseases.

The good news is that modest changes have substantial impact for improving your health. Dietary changes alone can reduce the risk of heart attack by 30 percent. There are risk factors that you cannot control, such as gender, increasing age and race, but there are several natural steps you can take to prevent or manage cardiovascular disease. It is important to work with your health care provider to evaluate your risk factors and determine steps you can take to change your lifestyle, reduce your risk, and increase your health and resulting enjoyment of life.

Risk factors you can influence in order to treat, control and prevent cardiovascular disease and stroke include:

- High Blood Pressure (Hypertension)
- Tobacco Smoke Exposure
- Excess Weight, Especially Belly Fat
- Diabetes
- High LDL and/or Low HDL Blood Cholesterol
- Physical Inactivity
- Drug Use (over-the counter, prescription and/or illegal drug use)
- Excessive Alcohol Use
- Stress Response
- Oxidant (Free Radical) Damage and Inflammation
- Dietary Choices

Cardiovascular disease refers to a group of conditions caused by atherosclerosis, previously referred to as hardening of the arteries. Atherosclerosis is the slow build up over time of cholesterol and other substances, called plaque, in artery walls. Oxidative stress and resulting inflammation contribute to the onset and progression of this buildup which eventually leads to reduced blood supply to the heart and brain. Some people experience resulting chest pain, called angina pectoris, as a warning sign of plaque buildup. Heart attack occurs when the plaque ruptures then clogs an artery leading to the heart, thereby cutting off the blood supply to the heart. Similarly, a stroke occurs when an artery leading to the brain becomes clogged or ruptures, depriving brain cells of the blood supply they need.

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One in three adults in the US has high blood pressure (Hypertension). The cause is unknown for 90 to 95 percent of cases. High Blood Pressure is a major risk factor for heart attack, stroke, kidney failure and blindness. It is called "The Silent Killer" because it usually has no symptoms. The only way to know whether you have it or not is to have your blood pressure measured. Up to 25% of people with high blood pressure are unaware of their condition, so regular checkups are important.

Blood pressure is reported as two forces: Systolic Pressure (the first number) is a measure of the force on the arteries when the heart pumps blood; Diastolic Pressure (the second number) is the force in the arteries between heart beats. Normal blood pressure is 120/80 or lower. Blood pressure rises when your heart beats, and falls when your heart rests between beats. If you are healthy, then your arteries are elastic and they stretch when your heart pumps blood through them.

High blood pressure requires the heart to work harder to pump your blood and your arteries must endure greater pressure and strain. You can work to control your blood pressure by losing excess weight, becoming more active, eating ample fruits and vegetables, and limiting sodium and alcohol intake.

People who smoke cigarettes or cigars and those exposed to second-hand smoke are at increased risk for heart attack and stroke, as well as peripheral vascular disease, lung, mouth and throat cancers, chronic lung diseases and infections.

Smoking is the most preventable cause of death in the US. Women who use oral contraceptives and also smoke are at high risk of stroke. Nicotine and carbon monoxide from tobacco damages blood vessel walls, causing plaque to build up. Additionally, these substances reduce the amount of oxygen in your blood, lower good (HDL) blood cholesterol, and can trigger the formation of dangerous blood clots. No matter how long you have been smoking, as soon as you quit, your risk of heart disease and stroke begin to drop. After just one to two years, your risk level will be significantly reduced.

Under certain conditions cholesterol can build up in the walls of your arteries, reducing or blocking the flow of blood to the heart and brain. Cholesterol is a soft, fat-like substance located in each cell in your body and is also located in your blood. It is part of a healthy body, but too much of it in your blood can indicate health issues. Like high blood pressure, high cholesterol has no symptoms. The American Heart Association recommends that everyone 20 years and older have their blood cholesterol levels checked every 5 years, and more often if you have other risk factors.

Controlling or preventing diabetes reduces cardiovascular-related risk. Diabetes results when sugar builds up too high in your blood due to insufficient insulin production or because your body does not use its insulin well. Obesity and physical inactivity increase the risk of type II diabetes, the most common form, which usually occurs in middle-age persons, but is occurring increasingly in children and young adults. Type I diabetes results when the pancreas makes little or no insulin; onset usually occurs in children and young adults.

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It is important to participate regularly in moderate to vigorous physical activity in order to control high blood pressure, diabetes, excess body fat, obesity, blood cholesterol, and reduce your risk of heart disease, heart attack, and stroke.

Moderate activities include gardening, brisk walking, housework, dancing, jogging, running, rowing, swimming, bicycling, tennis, basketball, soccer, and the like. Exercise 30 minutes per day, or for 10 minutes at three different times during the day, and reduce the amount of time you spend watching TV, surfing the internet and playing computer games. If you have been inactive, start with 10 minutes per day and increase your activity duration as you are able. Work with your health care provider to develop an appropriate plan.

Moderate to vigorous physical activity offers added benefits by relieving stress, giving you more energy, activating your immune system, releasing toxins, improving your mood and appearance, and giving you more confidence.

Excess body fat, especially when located around the belly, raises health risks for high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, diabetes, heart disease and stroke.

High risk is considered a waistline of 35" or greater for women and greater than 40" for men. Modest weight loss of as little as 5 to 10 percent of your current weight can help to reduce your blood pressure and your risk of diabetes.

People under stress are more prone to smoke, drink, abuse drugs, overeat and drink too much alcohol, all of which increase the risk of heart disease and stroke.

We all experience stress, but we differ in the amount of stress and in the ways we deal with it. It is important to reduce sources of stress and find healthful ways to manage the stress you cannot eliminate. Find ways to relax and make stress reduction a priority: breathe deeply, play with your kids and pets, exercise, go for a stroll, garden, take a nap, read for pleasure, listen to music, dance, stretch, get restful sleep, laugh, smile, get outdoors...

If you drink, do so in moderation in order to reduce your risk of high blood pressure, heart failure and stroke.

Alcoholic drinks are low in nutrients and high in calories. If you are trying to manage your weight and/or reduce your sugar intake, then avoid them. If you don't drink, then don't start. Men should not consume more than two drinks in any one day, and women need to limit their consumption to one alcoholic drink per day. "One drink" is defined as 1.5 fl. oz. of 80 proof liquor (bourbon, Scotch, vodka, gin), 1 fl. oz. of 100 proof liquor, 4 fl. oz. of wine or 12 fl. oz. of beer. Pregnant women and women who could possibly become pregnant should avoid all alcohol which can cause serious problems, including birth defects, especially in the first two weeks when a woman is not yet aware that she is pregnant.

Intravenous drug abuse and cocaine use increase the risk of heart infections (endocarditis) and are associated with a high risk of stroke and heart attack. Their use can be fatal for first-time users. Please, please, abstain.

Aim to eat low-salt, high-fiber, natural and organic foods, including a wide variety of colorful vegetables and fruits along with lean protein and whole grains, while avoiding added sugar, trans-fats and saturated fats.