

A Healthy Heart



Cardiovascular Basics

Your heart and blood vessels make up your circulatory system, which supplies oxygen and nutrients to every cell in your body. If the vessels that supply oxygen and nutrients become damaged, the whole body may be affected. A healthy circulatory system is the key to a physically healthy life at any age.

What Is Cardiovascular Disease?

Cardiovascular disease is the broad term used to describe a group of diseases that result in blockages of blood flow and that affect circulation in the heart, brain, eyes, kidneys, and legs.

Types of Cardiovascular Disease

- *Arteriosclerosis* — When arteries thicken and harden, the result is poor blood circulation that can lead to angina, heart attack, cardiomyopathy, or heart failure.
- *Atherosclerosis* — Occurs when cholesterol and other fatty substances (plaque) build up within arterial walls. As plaque builds up in an artery, blood flow is limited and over time can be blocked completely.
- *Heart attack* — During a heart attack, a portion of the heart muscle dies. This is usually caused by a sudden blockage of one or more of the arteries that supply the heart with blood.
- *Heart failure* — The heart cannot pump the amount of blood the body needs for life.
- *High blood pressure* — Increased pressure in the blood vessels makes the heart work harder than normal to pump the same amount of blood. This can cause the heart to enlarge and weaken over time.
- *Stroke* — Cardiovascular disease that affects the blood vessels supplying blood to the brain.

Risk Factors

Risk factors include traits and lifestyle habits that increase the risk of disease. The more risk factors a person has, the higher his or her chances are of developing heart disease. The key to prevention is to reduce risk factors you can control.

Risk Factors You Can Control

- *Diet* — An unhealthy diet that is high in fat and cholesterol increases the risk of heart disease. Choose heart-healthy foods that include lean cuts of meat, low-fat dairy products, five to seven fruits and vegetables daily, and whole grains. Limit fats like fried foods.
- *Cholesterol* — A high level of cholesterol in the blood is a major risk factor for coronary heart disease, heart attack, and stroke.

Total cholesterol includes LDL, (low-density lipoprotein), HDL (high-density lipoprotein), and other types of cholesterol. LDL, sometimes called the “bad” cholesterol, can turn into plaque that clogs arteries. HDL, referred to as the “good” cholesterol, helps remove the LDL cholesterol from your body.

- *Weight* — Reach and maintain a healthy weight. Extra pounds mean extra work for your heart. Weight loss can result in immediate reduction in blood pressure, lowering your risk for heart disease.
- *Alcohol use* — Consume alcohol in moderation -- one drink per day for women, two drinks for men. Drinking too much alcohol can raise blood pressure and increase the risk for heart failure and stroke.
- *Physical inactivity* — Regular, moderate-to-vigorous exercise reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease. Exercise helps control other risk factors, such as high blood cholesterol, diabetes, obesity, and high blood pressure. The American Heart Association

recommends 30 to 60 minutes of physical activity on most days of the week for most people.

- *High blood pressure* — High blood pressure makes the heart work harder than normal, causing it to enlarge and weaken over time. A healthy diet and physical activity help to keep blood pressure at a healthy level. Normal blood pressure is less than 120/80.
- *Stress* — Emotional or psychological stress affects your physical condition. Handling stress poorly can increase your risk. Lessen the stress in your life by setting realistic goals for yourself and rejecting excessive demands. You can also try relaxation, meditation, exercise, and breathing techniques to help you cope with everyday stress.
- *Smoking* — Smoking more than doubles the risk of heart attack. The nicotine and carbon monoxide in tobacco smoke reduce the amount of oxygen in the blood. Smoking also damages blood vessel walls, causing plaque to build up, and contributes to high blood pressure and low levels of HDL cholesterol. If you smoke, get the help you need to quit!

Risk Factors Beyond Your Control

Some things that increase your risk of developing cardiovascular disease are out of your control.

- *Family history* — If someone in your immediate family had a heart attack before age 65, you may be at risk, too.

- *Age* — A heart attack can strike at any age, but becomes more likely as you become older. Most people who die of a heart attack are over the age of 65.
- *Gender* — Men are at risk for heart disease at a younger age than women. A woman's risk begins to increase around age 55.
- *Ethnicity* — African Americans, American Indians, Hispanics, and native Hawaiians have a higher risk of heart disease than Caucasians.
- *Diabetes* — Diabetics are at increased risk for developing cardiovascular disease. If you are a diabetic, talk with your health care provider about special precautions you may need to take.

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