

Preventing Heart Disease

Heart disease affects the quality of life of millions of Americans and is the leading cause of death in both men and women. The development of most heart disease is related to the way we live. Changing to a healthier lifestyle will help prevent both new and repeat heart problems.

Heart disease develops over many years. As you get older, you are more likely to have heart problems.

Heart attacks are more frequent in men than women up to about age 60. Both men and women need to take care of their health and reduce their risk for heart disease as they get older.

A family history of heart disease is an important risk factor. If members of your family have had heart disease, it is especially important for you to try to reduce other risks.

Try to control medical conditions that increase your risk of heart disease.

Diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol are major risk factors for heart disease. The same things that help prevent or control these conditions also lessen the risk for heart disease. For example, medicines for blood pressure, such as ACE inhibitors, also reduce the workload of the heart and other organs.

Get regular exercise.

Many people get very little exercise. You should get regular exercise because it:

- Helps blood circulation.
- Helps keep blood pressure and blood cholesterol within normal limits.
- Keeps muscles in tone.
- Helps prevent obesity.
- Improves your mood.

All this helps keep your heart healthy. Aerobic exercise is important to building and maintaining heart and lung efficiency. Adults should get at least 30 minutes of moderate aerobic exercise most days of the week, preferably daily. Regular mild exercise is far better for you than occasional strenuous exercise. Try to walk at least a mile a day.

Stop smoking.

Smoking is a major risk factor for heart disease. It causes narrowing of the arteries (the blood vessels that carry blood around the body). If you are a smoker, your blood is more likely to form clots in the arteries of the heart. Smoking also damages the lungs, which in turn may cause heart damage. Research has shown that smokers who quit can reduce their risk for heart disease.

Maintain a healthy weight.

Extra weight increases blood pressure, causes strain on the heart, and increases the risk for heart disease. It also increases the risk for type 2 diabetes, which is also a risk factor for heart disease.

To see if you are overweight, find out what your body mass index (BMI) is. The BMI uses your height and weight to estimate how much fat is on your body. Generally, the higher your BMI, the higher your health risk. A BMI of at least 25 indicates overweight. A BMI of 30 or more indicates you are obese.

You can see what your BMI and health risk are and talk to your doctor about weight control if you are overweight. Weight loss should be slow and steady. Aim to lose no more than 2 pounds a week.

Eat a healthy diet.

A healthy diet is the best way to get the nutrients your body needs. Extreme dieting is not healthy. Cutting out fat is the easiest way to take in fewer calories and still have a balanced diet. For its weight, fat contains more than twice the calories of other foods. A diet that is high in cholesterol and fat, especially animal (saturated) fat, increases blood cholesterol and contributes to artery disease. Artery disease is the main cause of heart attacks.

Research is being done to see if taking some vitamins may help prevent heart disease. Ask your health care provider about taking vitamin supplements.

Try to reduce stress.

Stress and how you handle it is a risk factor for heart disease because it can increase blood pressure and blood cholesterol. Relaxation exercises can help reduce stress. You can also try to avoid stressful situations. Learn to take time out. Hobbies can be helpful.

Take small steps toward a healthy lifestyle.

If you decide you need to make changes in the way you live, you probably won't be able to turn your life around all at once. Try to develop healthy habits that incorporate these lifestyle goals. If you do, you will greatly decrease your chances for developing heart disease.

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