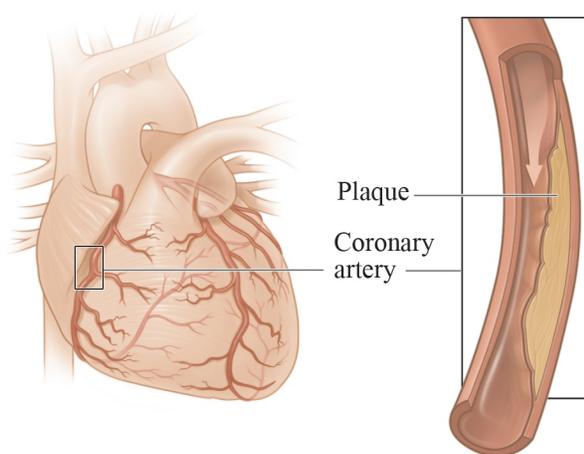


Your Health: Your Risk for Heart Disease



Although heart disease can refer to nearly any heart problem, when most people say “heart disease” they are talking about coronary artery disease (CAD). In CAD, the arteries that bring oxygen-rich blood to your heart become narrow or blocked. They usually become blocked by plaque—deposits of fats and other substances. Poor blood flow can lead to angina symptoms (such as chest pain or pressure) and also can cause a heart attack.

Heart disease is common in the United States. But you may help prevent it by making lifestyle changes.

What are the risk factors?

A risk factor for heart disease is something that makes it more likely you will get the disease. Some of these have to do with lifestyle, and you can change them. Others you cannot change.

Things you can change

- You smoke. Smoking is a major risk factor and also makes other risk factors worse.

- You have high cholesterol levels. Cholesterol is a type of fat that can narrow your arteries. Eating foods high in saturated fat and cholesterol may raise your cholesterol levels.
- You have high blood pressure. High blood pressure damages your blood vessels and makes the heart work harder. This can make heart disease develop faster.
- You have high blood sugar levels. It's important for people with diabetes to keep their blood sugar in their target range.
- You weigh too much. Being very overweight makes it more likely you will develop high blood pressure and high blood sugar, which are major risk factors.
- You are not very active. Getting too little exercise may cause high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

Things you cannot change

- You have a family history of heart disease. You're more at risk if one or more of your close relatives have or had early CAD.
- You are an older adult. People older than 65 are more likely to have heart disease.
- You are a man. In general, men get CAD 10 years earlier than women. But by age 60, CAD is one of the leading causes of death in both sexes.

What do the risk factors mean?

Having a risk factor for heart disease does not necessarily mean you will get the disease. Your doctor will look at all of your risk factors. This will help your doctor decide how much risk you have and help him or her choose your treatment. Many people think that if their cholesterol is high, for example, they need medicine. This is not always true. Making lifestyle changes may be a better treatment choice.

How do you reduce your risk?

You can reduce at least some of your risk for getting heart disease. Look at the risk factors you can change, and make an effort to change one now. Do not try to change all of them at once.

- It is hard to stop smoking, but you can. You may have to try different plans until something finally works for you. If it takes time, do not worry. The important thing is to keep trying. Talk to your doctor about tools to help you quit smoking. He or she may suggest medicine, counseling, or ways to relieve stress.
- If you have high blood pressure, high blood sugar, or high cholesterol, talk to your doctor. You may need medicine. Changing what you eat and how much you exercise may also help you.

Eating healthy foods and being active may help reduce many of your risk factors. Making changes here can improve cholesterol levels and lower blood pressure. These changes may also help you control your blood sugar if you have diabetes.

To get started on eating healthy foods and being active:

- Eat fewer fatty foods. Drink low-fat or skim milk, not whole milk. Stay away from packaged snacks and cookies. Read food labels to see how much fat, especially saturated fat and trans fat, is in the food.
- Use “healthy” fats, such as canola or olive oil, for cooking and salads.

- Make sure you eat vegetables, fruit, and whole grains every day.
- Try to walk briskly or do another moderate activity at least 2½ hours a week. One way to do this is to be active 30 minutes a day, at least 5 days a week. The goal is to try to do activities that raise your heart rate.

Create a plan

Think about what you want to change. Think about specific steps you will take and when you will begin.

Write down this “action plan.” Putting things in writing makes you more likely to act.

- Write down your goals—what you want to do. Be very specific, such as writing, “I will make an appointment with my doctor to talk about how I can stop smoking.” When you have met one goal, make another one.
- Make your first steps small. Small goals are easier to meet, and they provide building blocks to doing more. Do not say you will give up eating a favorite fatty food. Instead, say you will eat it one less time each week.
- Get support. Talk to your family and friends about what you are going to do.
- Check your progress. Write down what you eat every day. Write down how much you exercise. Track how many days you go without smoking, and how you feel each day.
- Reward yourself when you reach a goal. Go to a movie or buy something for yourself.
- Keep trying. We all slip sometimes. Do not feel bad if you eat too much or have a cigarette. Get back on track the next day.