



Risk Factors for Heart Disease

According to the American Heart Association, major risk factors are those that research has shown significantly increase the risk of coronary heart disease. Some can be changed, and some can't. The chance of developing heart disease increases with the more risk factors you have, and with a greater level of each risk factor. Control, treatment, or modification of risk factors is important to all, and especially important to those who already have heart disease.

Major risk factors that can't be changed

Age: The majority of people who die of coronary heart disease are over the age of 65, and women at older ages are more likely than men are to die from heart attack within a few weeks.

Male gender: Men have heart attacks earlier in life and have a greater risk of heart attack in general, however, risk in women increases after menopause, and it is important to note that heart disease is still the number one cause of death in men and women.

Heredity: People with a family history of heart disease are more likely to develop it themselves, especially if they have risk factors other than genetics. It is likely that people with a family history of heart disease share common environments and habits, and those can be modified to lessen the risk.

Major risk factors that CAN be changed

Smoking: Cigarette smokers have a 2 to 4 time higher risk of developing coronary heart disease.. While risks aren't as high for cigar and pipe smokers, it is still significantly higher than the risk for non-smokers. Exposure to second hand smoke increases the risk for non-smokers. A qualified smoking cessation specialist can offer the tools necessary for a successful plan to quit.

High Blood Cholesterol: A high level of blood cholesterol is a major risk factor for coronary heart disease and also a secondary risk factor for stroke. High density lipoprotein, or HDL, is termed "good" cholesterol, because it gives some protection against heart disease. Low density lipoprotein, or LDL, is termed "bad" cholesterol because too much can slowly build up in the inner walls of the arteries that feed the heart and brain and narrow those arteries. Your liver produces most of the cholesterol your body needs, and the rest comes from the foods you eat. The only way to discover your levels of blood cholesterol and know if they are within a healthy range is to have a blood test, and then discuss any necessary treatment options with your doctor. Lifestyle habits can contribute significantly to healthier levels of cholesterol. Regular physical activity has been shown to increase HDL's, and a diet low in saturated fat, trans fat, and dietary cholesterol can modify "good" and "bad" cholesterol.

High Blood Pressure: When the pressure of the blood in the arteries is too high, it increases the heart's workload, causing it to thicken and become stiffer. This causes the heart not to work properly and also increases your risk of stroke, heart attack, kidney failure, and congestive heart failure. Since there are often no symptoms to signal high blood pressure, it is important to have it checked regularly. While your doctor may find it necessary to prescribe medications, exercise has also been shown to be a significant contributor to lower blood pressure.

Physical Inactivity: An inactive lifestyle is a major risk factor for coronary heart disease and can also negatively impact obesity, high blood pressure, cholesterol, and diabetes. Regular, moderate to vigorous physical activity helps prevent heart disease and positively impact body weight, cholesterol, blood pressure,

stress, and an overall feeling of satisfaction. With input from your doctor, a physical activity regimen can be developed for any individual, regardless of most health conditions or physical disability. Regular evaluation of personal fitness goals and exercise program is recommended to achieve the most benefit from activity. It is also important to review any exercise decisions following a change in health history. Talk with an aquatics or fitness specialist if you have any questions about your current program.

Obesity and Overweight: Excess body fat – especially around the waist – is a major risk factor in developing heart disease and stroke. The heart has to work harder to move excess weight. Added weight also raises blood pressure, cholesterol, and makes diabetes more likely to develop. Losing weight is difficult for many people, and certain medical conditions make it even harder, but even small decreases in body weight and body fat can lower the risk of heart disease. A combination of exercise and healthful food choices has been shown to be the most effective way to lose weight, especially long term. Log on to www.mypyramid.gov to register for your personal account and tracking system for exercise and food choices.

Diabetes Mellitus: With diabetes, the body either does not produce enough insulin or it can't use the insulin it does produce as well as it should. When insulin is either not present, or not doing its job, glucose levels are not controlled, and this carries a high risk of developing heart disease. At least 65% of people with diabetes die of some form of heart or blood vessel disease.

There are different types of diabetes, and some is more difficult to prevent and control, however, it is believed that the majority of diabetes can be prevented, controlled and in some cases, even reversed, with a change in lifestyle. It is crucial to work with your healthcare provider to balance insulin and glucose, and to control any other risk factors. Obesity and inactivity make it even harder to control insulin and blood glucose. Physical activity and healthy food choices once again may be the first line of defense against diabetes.

Some other factors that contribute to heart disease

Stress: Some researchers have found a relationship between the stress in a person's life and the development of coronary heart disease. The body's natural reaction to stress can make the heart work harder, and stress can affect other risk factors, such as smoking and overeating. While each of us handles stress differently, exercise has been shown to be one of the best ways to control stress.

Alcohol: Most health researchers currently agree that drinking moderate amounts of alcohol (one drink for women and two drinks for men) can lower the risk of heart disease, but drinking too much can raise blood pressure, cause heart failure and lead to stroke, depression, accidents, cancer and other diseases. If you drink in excess, and can't decrease or stop on your own, talk to your doctor to find the most appropriate professional to guide you. If you don't currently drink, don't start!

Diet and Nutrition: Diets high in saturated fats, cholesterol, and salt raise blood cholesterol, promote atherosclerosis, raise blood pressure and increase bodyweight. A nutrient rich diet, containing fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean protein and fat-free or low fat dairy products is the best defense against heart disease. A registered dietician can guide food choices, especially if you have specific health concerns, and a basic understanding of food composition and serving sizes can be obtained by visiting www.mypyramid.gov. Healthful food is delicious and easy to prepare, especially when you do a little homework!

We can't choose our parents, or DNA, and certain health conditions are a part of genetics and unavoidable instances. We can control our nutrition and activity choices and habits - risk factors we CAN change. Just because the information is available doesn't mean it is always easy to make changes in long term lifestyle habits. Sometimes, it is overwhelming to try and do it alone or find the emotional support needed to carry you along. Ask for help, make short term goals that lead to long term goals and reward yourself for sticking with your plan.