

The Truth About Heart Disease Risk Factors

By

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Did you know that heart disease—the number one killer of women—is largely preventable? **Coronary heart disease (CHD)** is a condition in which plaque gradually builds up inside your coronary arteries. These arteries supply oxygen-rich blood to your heart muscle. Over time, plaque hardens and can narrow your coronary arteries, or the plaque can rupture (break open) and cause a blood clot to form on its surface, both of which can limit blood flow. When the flow of oxygen-rich blood to your heart muscle is reduced or blocked, angina or a heart attack may occur.

Thanks to decades of research supported by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), we now understand the key risk factors for heart disease. While there are some risk factors you can't control—such as older age, gender, and family history of CHD—there are many risk factors that you can control, such as high blood cholesterol levels, high blood pressure, smoking, diabetes, overweight or obesity, and physical inactivity. By adopting a healthy lifestyle, you can prevent or delay your risk for heart disease. Here are six steps you can take, starting today:

- **Eat right.** Follow a healthy eating plan, which can help prevent or reduce high blood pressure and high blood cholesterol and help you maintain a healthy weight. Enjoy a variety of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean meats, poultry without skin, seafood, and fat-free or low-fat milk and dairy products. Limit salt, added sugars, solid fats, and refined grains.
- **Be physically active.** Pick activities you like and do each for at least 10 minutes at a time. Every bit adds up, and health benefits increase as you spend more time being active. Adults should get 2 hours and 30 minutes or more a week of activity that requires moderate effort, such as brisk walking.
- **Maintain a healthy weight.** If you are overweight or obese, work with your doctor to create a reasonable weight-loss plan. A loss of just 5 to 10 percent of your current weight can lower your risk of heart disease.
- **Don't start smoking. If you already smoke, then quit.** Smoking can damage and tighten blood vessels and raise your risk for atherosclerosis. Talk with your doctor about programs and products that can help you quit. Also, try to avoid secondhand smoke.

- **Manage stress.** Cultivate supportive relationships with people in your life with whom you can share your feelings or concerns, which can help relieve stress. If you have difficulty handling life's everyday challenges, consider taking part in a stress management program.
- **Know your numbers.** Talk to your doctor about your blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood glucose numbers. These are all key heart disease risk factors.

Regardless of your age, background, or health status, you can lower your risk of heart disease by following these suggestions. Go to the website nhlinfo@nhlbi.nih.gov for more information and for heart healthy recipes and start reducing your risk for heart disease today! You will be glad you did.