

## Heart Disease

### How to reduce your risk

#### What is heart disease?

You've probably heard people talk about heart disease but didn't know exactly what it meant. Heart disease means a problem with the heart and blood vessels, such as hardening of the arteries or heart attack. Heart disease is one of the leading causes of death in the United States.

#### Am I at risk of heart disease?

You may be at risk of heart disease if you have any of the risk factors in the box below. The more risk factors you have, the greater your risk.

#### Can I reduce my risk?

Yes. While you can't change everything that puts you at risk for heart disease, you can control many of the risk factors. Talk to your doctor about assessing your risk factors and making a plan to tackle potential problems. For most people, the best way to protect against heart disease is to avoid smoking, eat a healthy diet, exercise, and take care of health problems such as high cholesterol, high blood pressure and diabetes.

#### Stop smoking.

Quitting smoking is one of the best things you can do for your health. Quitting will improve your cholesterol level, lower your blood pressure and reduce your risk of heart disease. Talk to your doctor about how to quit.

#### Risk factors for heart disease

- Age and sex (a man 45 or older, or a woman 55 or older)
- History of early heart disease in your family (father or brother with heart problems before age 55, or mother or sister with heart problems before age 65)
- Cigarette smoking
- High cholesterol level
- High blood pressure
- Inactivity (not exercising)
- Obesity (being overweight)
- Diabetes

#### Eat a healthy diet.

A healthy diet is high in fiber and low in fat. It's one of the best ways you can improve your cholesterol levels. It can also help you lose weight if you're overweight, which in turn will help lower your blood pressure. A healthy diet will also help you control your blood sugar level if you have diabetes. Ask your doctor for advice on healthy eating. The box to the right should help you start making wise choices.



## Exercise regularly.

A good goal is to exercise 30 to 60 minutes, 4 to 6 times a week, but any exercise is better than none. Exercises such as walking, cycling, rowing or swimming are good because they work your whole body, including your heart. Exercise helps improve your cholesterol level, helps you lose weight, lowers your blood pressure and helps control your blood sugar level if you have diabetes. Start slowly and talk to your doctor if it's been a while since you've exercised.

## Reduce high cholesterol.

If you don't know your cholesterol level, ask your doctor if it should be checked. To reduce (and prevent) a high cholesterol level, limit how much fat and cholesterol (in meat and dairy foods) you eat. And exercise regularly. Some people with high cholesterol may also need to take medicine to keep it under control.

## Reduce high blood pressure.

High blood pressure can damage your blood vessels and raise your risk of heart disease and stroke. High blood pressure usually doesn't cause symptoms, so get your blood pressure checked at least every 1 to 2 years. If you have high blood pressure, talk to your doctor about ways to lower it, such as exercise, a healthy diet, and medicine if it's needed.

## Control diabetes.

Diabetes causes sugar to build up in the blood and, over time, can damage blood vessels and lead to heart attack and stroke. If you have diabetes, you can reduce the damage it may cause by controlling your blood sugar level with a healthy diet, weight loss and exercise, and medicine if your doctor prescribes it.

## Each day, try to eat:

- 6 to 11 servings of fiber-rich bread, cereal, rice and pasta
- 5 to 7 servings (or more!) of fruits and vegetables
- 2 to 3 servings of low-fat or non-fat milk, yogurt and cheese
- 2 to 3 servings of chicken, turkey, fish, lean meats, beans and egg whites
- Only small amounts of butter, margarine and cooking oils (canola or olive oil is best)

## What about aspirin?

Aspirin reduces the risk of heart attack by thinning the blood and lowering the risk of blood clots. However, aspirin can cause problems for some people. Talk to your doctor about whether taking aspirin might help you.

## Will having a glass of wine help my heart?

Light drinking (no more than 1 or 2 drinks a day) may reduce the risk of heart disease by increasing your HDL level (the "good" cholesterol). Wine, beer and liquor all seem to have similar benefits. However, alcohol can cause problems for some people. Ask your doctor if light drinking would be OK for you.

## How can I learn more?

- For more information about quitting smoking, call the local chapter of the American Lung Association (check the phone book) or visit their website at [www.lungusa.org](http://www.lungusa.org).
- For tips on reducing your cholesterol, call the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute Information Center at 800-575-WELL or visit their website at [www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov).
- For more information on heart disease, call the American Heart Association at 800-242-8721 or visit their website at [www.amhrt.org](http://www.amhrt.org).

## For women only

When it comes to heart disease, women have one advantage over men: the hormone estrogen. Estrogen appears to help protect against heart disease by raising the level of good cholesterol and lowering the level of bad cholesterol. Women's bodies make estrogen. At menopause, however, the amount of estrogen drops—and so does the protection it offers. One way to regain this protection is to put estrogen back in the body. This is called “estrogen replacement therapy.” Estrogen therapy does have risks, however, and you and your doctor must weigh these carefully.



The American Academy of Family Physicians Foundation has favorably reviewed this material. Favorable review means that medical information is accurate, but does not imply endorsement of any conclusions presented.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

The American Academy of Family Physicians provides health information on the World Wide Web at [familydoctor.org](http://familydoctor.org).

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358

## Additional comments from your family doctor