Something to care about

Heart disease is the leading cause of death for American adults. More than 27 million citizens have one or more types. This guide will help you learn about the risk factors for heart disease—those you can control and those beyond your control. Understanding and reducing your risks is the best way to start your journey toward preventing heart disease or reducing its impact on your health and well-being.
Your risk for heart disease

Heart disease can take many forms, including coronary heart disease, stroke, heart attack, atrial fibrillation, high blood pressure and cardiac arrest.

Are you more or less likely to have heart disease? Talk to your doctor about the risk factors to find out. Risk factors are behaviors or conditions that can increase your chances of developing a disease. There are many risk factors for heart disease—those you can control and those you can’t. Lifestyle risk factors are generally under your control, while genetics and normal aging are not.

**Lifestyle risk factors include:**

- Having high blood pressure
- Having high cholesterol
- Smoking
- Having diabetes
- Being overweight or obese
- Being physically inactive
- Experiencing stress
- Consuming large amounts of alcohol
- Taking oral contraceptives

**Uncontrollable risk factors include:**

- Growing older (45+ for men, 55+ for women)
- Your family history (father or brother with heart disease before age 55, mother or sister before 65)
- Your race (American Indians, African Americans and Hispanics tend to have heart disease more often than Caucasians)

Since these factors cannot be controlled, it is very important to make positive changes to behaviors that can be.
Knowing your risk factors

**High blood pressure**

Blood pressure measurements are given as two numbers, like 120/76 (read as “120 over 76”), representing the pressure of your blood against the walls of your arteries. The first number, systolic pressure, is read during a heartbeat. The second number is the diastolic pressure, measured between heartbeats.

Optimal blood pressure is less than 120/80. High blood pressure is greater than 140/90. High blood pressure makes the heart work harder and can cause hardening of the arteries.

**High cholesterol**

Cholesterol is a soft, fat-like, waxy substance found in the bloodstream. Having too much cholesterol is a major risk for coronary heart disease, which can lead to heart attack.

Cholesterol levels are measured by checking LDL, HDL and triglyceride levels. The higher your LDL number, the greater your risk for heart disease. A higher HDL number, however, is better. Exercise tends to reduce LDL while raising HDL. High triglyceride levels reveal an increased risk of heart disease.

**Smoking**

Cigarette smoking is the most important preventable risk factor for heart disease. If you smoke one pack a day, you are more than twice as likely to have a heart attack and five times as likely to suddenly die from one.

The good news is that quitting smoking lets your body begin to heal almost immediately. In fact, over time, your risk of having a heart attack declines to levels of those shown by people who have never smoked.
**Diabetes**

Diabetes affects the body’s ability to produce or respond to insulin, a hormone that allows blood sugar to enter the cells so that it can be used for energy.

With type 1 diabetes, the body does not produce insulin. Type 2 diabetes occurs when the body does not produce enough insulin or the cells ignore it. Type 2 diabetes is often caused by lifestyle.

Diabetes doubles the likelihood of developing heart disease. It can be managed through diet, weight management, exercise, stress management and medications.
**Weight**

Having too much body fat makes the heart work harder and contributes to other risk factors, such as lower HDL, higher blood pressure and diabetes.

It is estimated that, in this country, 65% of adults and 17% of children are either overweight or obese. These numbers are increasing alarmingly.

Weight management is an area where many people can reduce their risk of heart disease. Losing as little as 10 pounds can make a difference. Achieving and maintaining a healthy weight can make a big difference.

**Physical inactivity**

A lack of exercise is a major risk for developing heart disease. It also contributes to other risk factors, including obesity, high blood pressure, high triglycerides, low HDL and diabetes. The survival rate of heart attack victims is higher for those who exercise regularly.

Routine aerobic exercise improves heart health, providing many health benefits including:

- Weight loss/management
- Improved muscle tone
- Lower blood pressure
- Stronger heart muscle
- Decreased blood sugar
- Reduced stress
- Improved sense of well-being
- Higher HDL

The survival rate of heart attack victims is higher for those who exercise regularly.

Aim for at least 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise most days of the week. If you’re just getting started after a period of inactivity, talk to your health care provider first. Even simply going for a walk is a good exercise activity.

**Stress**

Uncontrolled stress contributes to high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels, smoking, physical inactivity and overeating. Many studies suggest a link between cardiovascular disease and stress.
Reducing risk factors

Keeping your heart and arteries healthy reduces your risk of developing heart disease. The more healthy choices you make, the lower your risk will be.

- Eat a diet low in saturated fats and high in fiber
- Use low-fat substitutions, like applesauce instead of oil in recipes and mustard instead of mayonnaise
- Replace food made with processed grains with whole grain foods
- Eat a higher proportion of fruits and vegetables at meals and for snacks
- Start a regular exercise program
- Lose weight
- If you smoke, quit
- Reduce salt intake
- Reduce alcohol consumption
- Learn how to manage stress
- Have regular check-ups with your primary health care provider

Signs of heart disease

Heart disease can be a slow, silent danger or a sudden, fast killer.

Silent dangers

High blood pressure can be subtle. High cholesterol is completely hidden without a blood test.

Both can be diagnosed and treated by your primary health care provider and/or heart specialists, depending upon the type and severity of the condition.

Bottom line: If you have risk factors, talk to your health care provider. Don’t wait.
Sudden killers

Early treatment is essential if you or a loved one experiences a heart attack, stroke or cardiac arrest. Call 911 immediately if any of the following symptoms appear:

HEART ATTACK

Some heart attacks are sudden and intense, but most start slowly with mild pain or discomfort.

The most common signs include:

- Chest discomfort in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes or that goes away and comes back. It can feel like uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain.
- Discomfort in other areas of the upper body. Symptoms can include pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach.
- Shortness of breath with or without chest discomfort

Other signs include:

- Breaking out in a cold sweat
- Nausea
- Lightheadedness or dizziness
- Numbness of arms
- Unexplained anxiety, weakness or fatigue
Heart attack signs can be different in women. Like men, women can experience chest pain or discomfort, but they are somewhat more likely than men to experience some of the other common symptoms:

- Shortness of breath
- Nausea/vomiting
- Back or jaw pain

The early signs of heart attacks in women are often overlooked. A study of 500 female heart attack patients found that most experienced these symptoms weeks before their heart attack:

- Unusual fatigue
- Sleep disturbances
- Shortness of breath

**STROKE**

Stroke symptoms happen suddenly, but can occur over several hours, with symptoms worsening over time. They include:

- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination
- Sudden, severe headache with no known cause

**CARDIAC ARREST**

During cardiac arrest, the heart stops beating. Call 911 immediately if someone near you experiences cardiac arrest, then start CPR. Use an AED (Automatic External Defibrillator) if one is available. Signs of cardiac arrest include:

- Sudden loss of responsiveness
- No normal breathing

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
Trust your heart to the

Experts at Heart

- Specialists providing individualized care
- Locations near your home and work
- Advanced technology for diagnosis and treatment

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CALL
1-866-520-2510
marshfieldclinic.org/experts-at-heart