

Preventing Coronary Heart Disease

Cardiovascular diseases are the most common causes of death among men and women of all racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. The National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion estimates that at least 70 million Americans have some form of heart disease, including high blood pressure, coronary heart disease, congestive heart failure and stroke.



Coronary heart disease (CHD) is the most common type of heart disease and is the number one cause of death in Americans. Read more to learn about causes, symptoms and prevention.

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Causes of CHD

Coronary heart disease is caused by atherosclerosis, which is a hardening of the inner walls of the arteries. This hardening occurs due to a build up of plaque on the artery walls. The artery walls become narrowed and the blood flow to the heart is eventually cut off, leading to heart attacks and stroke.

The major causes of atherosclerosis are:

- High cholesterol. Excess cholesterol is deposited on the artery walls.
- High blood pressure. The heart needs to work harder to pump blood through the body, which can eventually weaken the heart muscle. High blood pressure can also speed up atherosclerosis.
- Smoking. Nicotine causes the body to release adrenaline, which can constrict the artery walls and increase blood pressure.

Symptoms of CHD

The most common symptom of coronary heart disease is chest pain, or angina. A person suffering from angina may experience discomfort, heaviness, pressure, aching, burning, fullness, squeezing or a painful feeling. These sensations can usually be felt in the chest as well as in the arms, neck or jaw. Oftentimes people experiencing angina mistake these sensations for indigestion or heartburn, and many people experience heart attacks without experiencing angina.

Other symptoms include shortness of breath, heart palpitations, weakness and a rapid heartbeat.

Risk Factors for CHD

Many of the biggest risk factors for coronary heart disease and other cardiovascular diseases are due to lifestyle choices. The most common risk factors are:

- Being overweight or obese. Excess body weight can contribute to a number of health problems, including high blood pressure and heart disease.
- High blood pressure. High blood pressure increases the risk of many heart-related diseases and other health problems since it enlarges and weakens the heart.
- Smoking. The pollutants in tobacco can damage the artery walls and reduce the amount of oxygen in the blood. Smoking can also reduce the amount of "good" cholesterol in the blood.
- Diabetes. People with diabetes usually have lower levels of "good" cholesterol in the body as well as high blood pressure.
- Inactivity. Physical inactivity often leads to poor nutrition and obesity.
- Diet. A poor diet can lead to high levels of "bad" cholesterol in the blood. This cholesterol is then deposited in the arteries.
- Unfortunately, even the healthiest lifestyle may not be enough to prevent heart disease. Some of the risk factors that cannot be controlled are:
 - Sex. Heart disease is more common in men than in women.
 - Age. People over 40 have an increased risk of developing heart disease since fat deposits collect in the arteries over time. Post-menopausal women may also be at a higher risk for heart disease.
 - Family history. According to the American Heart Association, if your brother, father or grandfather had a heart attack before age 55, or your sister, mother or grandmother had one before age 65, your risk of heart attack may be increased.
 - Race. African Americans, Mexican Americans, American Indians and native Hawaiians show a higher risk of heart disease than do Caucasians.

Treatment and Prevention of CHD

Fortunately, most people can treat heart disease with the proper diet and lifestyle changes.

- Early prevention. Have your blood pressure and cholesterol checked regularly. Your doctor can provide suggestions to help you manage your health.
- Regular exercise. Even mild to moderate physical activity can lower blood pressure and reduce the risk of heart disease. The American Heart Association recommends exercising for 30 to 60 minutes most days of the week. When you first begin try exercising for 10 minutes each day and work your way up to the suggested time amount.
- Proper diet. A healthy diet can lower blood pressure and reduce cholesterol levels. Eat a high-fiber, low-sodium and low-fat diet that emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains and nuts and contains reduced amounts of red meat and eggs.
- Drink alcohol in moderation. Excess alcohol can lead to higher blood pressure and an increased risk of heart failure and stroke. Adults should consume no more than 1-2 alcoholic drinks a day to reduce risk of heart disease.
- Quit smoking. Tobacco use has been proven to be a major contributing factor of cardiovascular disease. It is estimated that smokers' risk of heart attacks is more than twice the risk for non-smokers.
- Manage stress. Too much stress can lead to unhealthy lifestyle decisions, such as poor nutrition and lack of physical activity. Learn to cope with stress in order to alleviate its contribution to high blood pressure.

Other Types of Heart Disease

Although coronary heart disease is the most common, there are other conditions that fall into the category of heart disease. They are:

- Abnormal heart rhythms, or arrhythmia
- Heart failure, or a weakening of the heart's ability to pump blood through the body
- Heart valve disease
- Congenital heart disease, or defects in the structure of the heart that occur before birth
- Heart muscle disease (cardiomyopathy), a thickened or enlarged heart
- Pericardial disease, or inflammation of the membrane surrounding the heart

Resources

For further information about cardiovascular disease, visit:

- The Center for Disease Control's Cardiovascular Health Program Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/cvh/index.htm>
- The American Heart Association Web site at www.americanheart.org
- The Cleveland Clinic at www.clevelandclinic.org