

Risk Factors

“Risk factors are behaviors or conditions that increase the chance of disease.”¹ While there are some risk factors that you cannot control, it is important to control those that can be modified. Here are some details to help you understand why certain factors put you at higher risk for heart disease.

Factors you *cannot* control:

- **Age.** “Simply getting older increases your risk for damaged and narrowed arteries and weakened or thickened heart muscle, which contributes to heart disease.”² Coronary artery disease is more likely to occur as you get older, especially after 65.
- **Gender.** “Men are generally at greater risk of heart disease. However, the risk for a woman increases after menopause.”² In men, the risk for heart attack increases after 45. In women, the risk increases after age 55;¹ however, over the last 20 years, the rates of heart attack have been increasing for women aged 35-54.³
- **Race.** “African Americans have more severe high blood pressure than Caucasians and therefore have a higher risk of heart disease. Heart disease risk is also higher among Mexican Americans, American Indians, native Hawaiians, and some Asian Americans. This is partly due to higher rates of obesity and diabetes in these populations.”⁴
- **Family history.** Family history of early heart disease – a father or brother diagnosed before age 55 or a mother or sister diagnosed before 65 – puts you at greater risk.¹

Factors you *can* control (modifiable):

- **Tobacco.** “Nicotine constricts [tightens] your blood vessels, and carbon monoxide can damage their inner lining....”² “Smoking and long-term exposure to secondhand smoke damage the interior walls of



arteries – including arteries to your heart – allowing deposits of cholesterol and other substances to collect and slow blood flow. Smoking also increases the risk of deadly blood clots forming and causing a heart attack.”⁵

- **Diabetes.** “Diabetes is the inability of your body to adequately produce or respond to insulin properly. Insulin, a hormone secreted by your pancreas, allows your body to use glucose, which is a form of sugar from foods. Diabetes can occur in childhood, but it appears more often in middle age and among overweight people. Diabetes greatly increases your risk of a heart attack.”⁵
- **High blood pressure.** “Uncontrolled high blood pressure can result in hardening and thickening of your arteries, narrowing the vessels through which blood can flow.”² “The risk of high blood pressure increases as you age, but the main culprits for most people are eating a diet too high in salt and being overweight. High blood pressure can also be an inherited problem.”⁵
- **High blood cholesterol or triglycerides (i.e., abnormal blood lipid levels).** “Cholesterol is a major part of the deposits that can narrow arteries throughout your body, including those that supply your heart. A high level of the wrong kind of cholesterol in your blood increases your risk of a heart attack. Low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol (the “bad” cholesterol) is most likely to narrow arteries. A high LDL level is undesirable and is often a result of a diet high in saturated fats and cholesterol. A high level of triglycerides, a type of blood fat related to your diet, also is undesirable. However, a high level of high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol (the “good” cholesterol), which helps the body clean up excess cholesterol, is desirable and lowers your risk of heart attack.”⁵



- **Physical inactivity.** “An inactive lifestyle contributes to high blood cholesterol levels and obesity. People who get regular aerobic exercise have better cardiovascular fitness, which decreases their overall risk of heart attack. Exercise is also beneficial in lowering high blood pressure.”⁵

- **Overweight and obesity.** “People who have excess body fat – especially if a lot of it is at the waist – are more likely to develop heart disease and stroke even if they have no other risk factors. Excess weight increases the heart’s work. It also raises blood pressure and blood cholesterol and triglyceride levels, and lowers HDL (“good”) cholesterol levels. It can also make diabetes more likely to develop.”⁶



- **Poor diet.** A poor diet, primarily one high in saturated fat and cholesterol, can contribute to heart disease risk.⁴ A poor diet is also usually one low in fruit and vegetable consumption.
- **Uncontrolled stress or anger.** Some scientists have noted a relationship between coronary heart disease risk and stress in a person’s life and their health behaviors.⁶ A person may respond to stress in ways that can increase their risk of a heart attack. A person who is under stress may overeat or smoke from nervous tension. Too much stress, as well as anger, can also raise blood pressure.⁵
- **Alcohol.** “Drinking too much alcohol can raise blood pressure, cause heart failure and lead to stroke. It can contribute to high triglycerides, cancer and other diseases, and produce irregular heartbeats. It contributes to obesity, alcoholism, suicide, and accidents. The risk of heart disease in people who drink moderate amounts of alcohol (an average of one drink for women or two drinks for men per day) is lower than in nondrinkers. One drink is defined as 1-½ fluid ounces (fl oz) of 80-proof spirits (such as bourbon, Scotch, vodka, gin, etc.), 1 fl oz of 100-proof spirits, 4 fl oz of

wine, or 12 fl oz of beer. It’s not recommended that nondrinkers start using alcohol or that drinkers increase the amount they drink.”⁶

- **Poor hygiene.** Regularly washing your hands² and other habits like getting enough sleep⁷... can help prevent viral or bacterial infections [that] can put you at risk of heart infections, especially if you already have an underlying heart condition.² “Researchers also believe poor dental health may contribute to heart disease. Germs on your teeth and gums can travel from your mouth to your heart, potentially worsening coronary artery disease.”²

Sources

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