

February 2014

Lower Your Risk of Heart Disease

Heart disease kills more than 700,000 Americans every year. But many of these deaths could be prevented if people took control of their risk factors for this disease. "Some of the risk factors for heart disease can be treated or controlled and some can't," says Robert Bonow, M.D., chief cardiologist at Northwestern Medical School in Evanston, Ill., and former president of the American Heart Association in Dallas. "That's why it's important to know your risk factors and change your lifestyle to reduce them."

The major risk factors that can't be changed:

- **Increasing age.**
- **Being male.** Men have a greater risk for heart attack than women, and they have attacks earlier in life.
- **Heredity.** Children of parents with heart disease and African Americans are more likely to develop heart disease.

To reduce the risk factors you can change:

- **Don't smoke and reduce your exposure to secondhand smoke.** People who smoke have two to four times the risk of developing coronary heart disease as nonsmokers. Exposure to secondhand smoke increases the risk for heart disease even for nonsmokers. "The good news is when you stop smoking -- no matter how long or how much you've smoked -- your risk for heart disease drops," says Dr. Bonow.
- **Control high cholesterol.** As cholesterol rises, so does the risk for heart disease. When other risk factors are present, this risk increases even more. Optimal total cholesterol is less than 200 mg/dL. Most people with a total cholesterol of 200 to 240 mg/dL can control it through diet and exercise. Most people with total cholesterol greater than 240 mg/dL need medication, as well as diet and exercise, to control it.
- **Control high blood pressure.** High blood pressure increases the heart's workload, causing the heart muscle to increase in size. When high blood pressure exists with obesity, smoking, high cholesterol or diabetes, the risk for heart attack increases several times.
- **Get plenty of exercise.** An inactive lifestyle is a risk factor for heart disease. But regular, moderate-to-vigorous physical activity helps prevent heart and blood vessel disease. The American Heart Association recommends a minimum of 30 minutes of physical activity on most days.
- **Maintain a healthy weight.** People who have excess body fat—especially at the waist—are more likely to develop heart disease even if they have no other risk factors. Excess weight makes the heart work harder and also raises blood pressure and cholesterol. Eating a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, low-fat dairy and lean protein can help you lose weight. Avoiding trans fats and limiting saturated fat can directly reduce heart disease risks.
- **Control blood sugar.** Diabetes significantly increases your risk for heart disease. Maintaining a normal blood sugar most of the time can help reduce that risk.
- **Watch how much you drink.** Drinking too much alcohol can raise blood pressure. The risk for heart disease in people who drink moderate amounts of alcohol is lower than in nondrinkers. Moderate drinking means no more than one drink a day for women and men 65 and older, and no more than two drinks a day for men younger than 65.



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