

Cardiac Wellness

In the U.S., more than 58 million Americans have some form of cardiovascular disease. With more than 960,000 dying of it each year, it is the major cause of death in adults, beating cancer deaths by a multiple of two. And cardiovascular disease can take many forms: high blood pressure, coronary artery disease, valvular heart disease, stroke or rheumatic fever/rheumatic heart disease.

There are two main categories of risk factors that play an important role in a person's chances of developing heart disease: major and contributing. Major risk factors are those that have been proven to increase your risk for heart disease. Contributing risk factors are those that doctors think can lead to an increased risk for heart disease, but their exact role has not been defined. Controlling as many risk factors as you can through lifestyle changes and if needed, medicines, may help reduce your risk of heart disease.

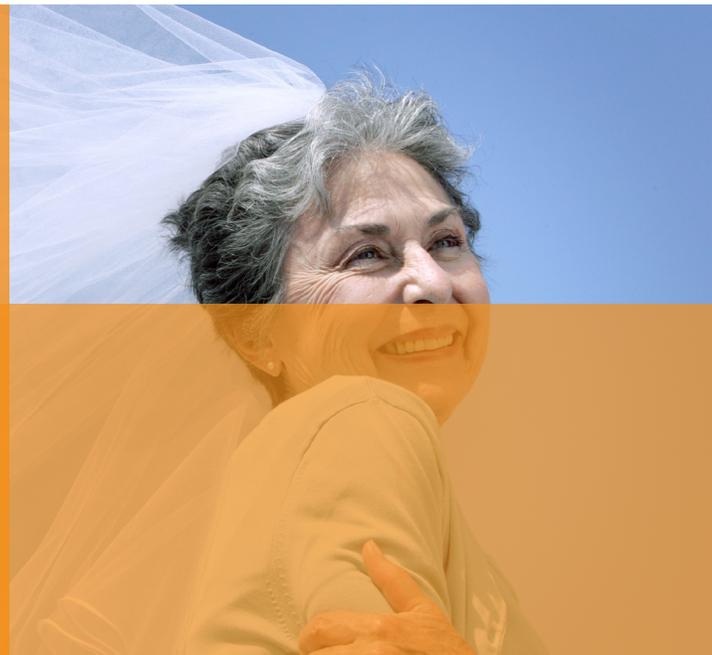
Major Risk Factors

High Blood Pressure (Hypertension) — High blood pressure increases your risk for heart disease,

heart attack and stroke. If you are obese, you smoke or you have high blood cholesterol levels along with high blood pressure, your risk for heart disease or stroke greatly increases. Blood pressure can vary with activity and with age, but a healthy adult who is resting generally has a systolic pressure reading between 120 and 130 and a diastolic pressure reading between 80 and 90 (or below).

High Blood Cholesterol — One of the major risk factors for heart disease is high blood cholesterol. Cholesterol, a fat-like substance carried in your blood, is found in all of your body's cells. The main culprit is the saturated fat in foods, such as butter fat in milk products, fat from red meat and tropical oils like coconut oil. Too much low-density lipoprotein (LDL or "bad cholesterol") in the blood causes the artery walls to thicken, putting you at risk for having a heart attack.

Diabetes — Heart problems are the leading cause of death among people with diabetes, especially in the case of adult-onset or Type II diabetes (also known as non-insulin-dependent diabetes). If you know that you have diabetes, you should already be under



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a physician's care, because good control of blood sugar levels can reduce your risk. If you think you may have diabetes but are not sure, see your physician for tests.

Obesity and Overweight — Extra weight is thought to lead to increased total cholesterol levels, high blood pressure and an increased risk for coronary artery disease. Obesity increases your chances of developing other risk factors for heart disease, especially high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol and diabetes. Losing as little as 10 to 20 pounds can help lower your heart disease risk.

Smoking — Better known for increasing your risk of lung cancer, cigarette and tobacco smoking also increases your risk for heart disease and peripheral vascular disease (disease in the vessels that supply blood to the arms and legs). Research has shown that smoking increases heart rate, constricts major arteries and can create irregularities in the timing of heartbeats, all of which make your heart work harder. Smoking raises blood pressure, which

increases the risk for stroke in people who already have high blood pressure.

Physical Inactivity — Physically inactive people have a greater risk of heart attack than people who exercise regularly. Exercise burns calories, helps to control cholesterol levels and diabetes, and may lower blood pressure. Exercise also strengthens the heart muscle. Those who actively burn 500 to 3500 calories per week, either at work or through exercise, can expect to live longer than people who do not exercise. Even moderate-intensity exercise is helpful if done regularly and long term.

Gender — This risk factor cannot be changed or eliminated. Overall, men have a higher risk for heart attack than women. The difference narrows after women reach menopause, because research shows that the female hormone estrogen helps protect women from heart disease.

Heredity — Heart disease tends to run in families. For example, if your parents or siblings had a heart or circulatory problem before age 55, then you are at greater risk for heart disease than someone with a different family history.

Age — Older age is a risk factor for heart disease. In fact, about 4 out of every 5 deaths due to heart disease occur in persons older than 65. As we age, our hearts tend to not work as well. The heart's walls may thicken, arteries may stiffen and harden, and the heart is less able to pump blood to the muscles of the body. Because of these changes, the risk of developing cardiovascular disease increases with age.

Contributing Risk Factors

Stress — Stress is considered a contributing risk factor for heart disease. Researchers do not know enough about how stress harms the heart because people deal so differently with it. Stress may also contribute to other risk factors. For example, people who are stressed may overeat for comfort, start smoking or smoke more than they normally would.

Alcohol — The consumption of too much alcohol can raise blood pressure, cause heart failure and lead to a stroke. It can also produce an irregular heartbeat, raise triglyceride levels and lead to a number of fatal diseases.

It's never too late — or too early — to begin improving heart health and reducing your risk for heart disease.

For more information about Nationwide Better Health visit:

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