Heart Health

# Cardiovascular Disease Risk Factors

What are the risk factors for cardiovascular disease?
Many factors can influence your risk for heart disease. Some can be controlled, others can't. Some factors greatly increase the risk of cardiovascular disease, whereas others may exert only a mild influence. Knowing your various risk factors and their combined effect can help you and your health care provider determine your overall risk for cardiovascular disease.

What risk factors can't be controlled?

Both gender and age exert strong effects on cardiovascular health. Generally, men have a greater risk than women and at an earlier age. For men, risk begins to increase by age 45 and continues to grow with each passing year. For women, the risk generally doesn't start to climb until after menopause. By age 65, however, the cardiovascular disease risk in women escalates substantially.

Race also plays a role in heart health, though it isn't entirely clear why. In general, African Americans have a higher risk for health problems such as high blood pressure and diabetes. These two health problems greatly increase a person's risk for cardiovascular disease.

What risk factors can be controlled?

While we can't control our age and family history, we can influence a lot of other cardiovascular disease risk factors.

Diet, exercise and smoking all profoundly influence heart health. The three are often called lifestyle factors. Though a healthy diet and regular exercise both contribute greatly to cardiovascular health, smoking is one of the worst offenders. Aside from blocking arteries and spiking blood pressure, smoking also increases the risk for lung cancer and emphysema.

One very common risk factor is having unhealthy levels of blood fats, also called lipids, such as cholesterol and triglycerides. Specifically, it's dangerous when your total cholesterol, your "bad" (LDL) cholesterol or your triglycerides are too high, and your "good" (HDL) cholesterol is too low. Poor diet, smoking, a sedentary lifestyle, and some medications can all contribute to lipid problems. If your levels are abnormal, most doctors will first recommend lifestyle changes-eating healthier, getting exercise and quitting smoking-sometimes combined with drugs designed to reduce cholesterol and triglycerides.

High blood pressure is another risk factor that most people can control. A healthy diet, exercise and quitting smoking can all help control blood pressure. When lifestyle changes don't do the trick,

doctors sometimes prescribe drugs to control blood pressure.

Diabetes is also a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease. In particular, every time your blood sugar climbs too high and stays too high, it contributes to cardiovascular disease. If you have diabetes, it’s even more important to exercise and eat right-plus, you must also regularly monitor your blood sugar and take your diabetes medication as prescribed.

HIV may also be a risk factor. Studies have shown that HIV-positive people not on antiretroviral (ARV) therapy have lower HDL cholesterol and higher triglycerides than people not living with the virus. Evidence also shows that the body’s hyperactive response-inflammation-to the presence of HIV, especially if it is not being treated, can gradually damage the heart and blood vessels, potentially increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease. Although people living with HIV can’t (yet) control whether or not they remain infected with the virus, they can help manage many of the health problems that HIV can cause.

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