Heart Health

Importance of Diet/Nutrition/Exercise

How can I reduce my risk of cardiovascular disease?

It is possible to dramatically reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD). In general, diet and exercise can also profoundly reduce risk. What's more, quit smoking, and within 10 years your heart attack and stroke risk drops by nearly 300 percent. These behavioral changes, along with good medical management, also apply to people who've already had a heart attack or have been diagnosed with significantly clogged arteries. For people living with HIV, managing cardiovascular disease risk may also involve decisions about when to start ARV therapy and which ARVs to avoid.

Some options to consider:

- Quit Smoking. Smoking causes chronic inflammation of the blood vessels and the heart. It negatively affects cholesterol, increases blood pressure and can lead to emphysema and lung cancer. For more information and tips on quitting, click here.

- Watch Your Diet. Saturated fat and processed sugars increase your risk of both heart disease and diabetes. Conversely, people who eat lots of fresh vegetables, fruits, whole grains, nuts and healthy fats-from fish, for example-appear to be protected from heart disease. For more information on diet and nutrition, click here.

- Get Active. Exercise strengthens your heart, reduces blood pressure, improves cholesterol and boosts your mood. For more information on exercise, click here.

- Reduce Stress. Chronic stress can increase your blood pressure and raise stress hormones. Click here to learn more about keeping stress levels in check.

- Consider Medication. When lifestyle changes don't do the trick-or aren't enough to bring your lipid levels under control-a number of drugs can improve cholesterol and triglycerides. Click

here for more information.

- Know Your HIV Status. Of course, the only way to know is to get tested. And if you are HIV positive, get treatment. Federal HIV treatment guidelines recommend starting ARV therapy as soon as doctors deliver a positive diagnosis instead of waiting for CD4 counts to fall. The risk of heart disease increases in people with lower CD4 counts who are not on treatment. Therefore, immediate ARV therapy would stop the possibility of uncontrolled HIV replication that could increase the risk of damage to the blood vessels and heart. Also, if you're HIV positive, it's important to choose the right treatments. When it comes to heart disease risk, not all antiretrovirals are created equal. Some ARVs can raise cholesterol and triglycerides, while others may increase the risk of developing diabetes.

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