

Arrhythmia

Cholesterol

Congenital
Defects
Children &
Adults

Diabetes

Heart Attack

Heart Failure

High Blood
Pressure

Stroke

More

Understand Your Risk of Heart Attack

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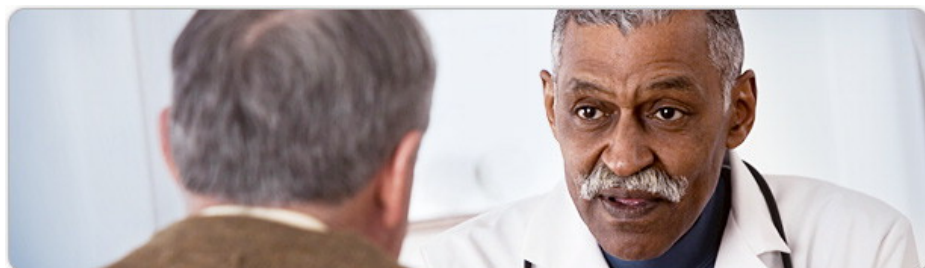
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Updated: Feb 4, 2014



Understanding the terms of risk

Extensive clinical and statistical studies have identified several factors that increase the risk of coronary heart disease and heart attack. View an animation of a heart attack.

- **Major risk factors** are those that research has shown significantly increase the risk of heart and blood vessel (cardiovascular) disease.
- **Contributing risk factors**
Other factors are associated with increased risk of cardiovascular disease, but their significance and prevalence haven't yet been precisely determined.
- **Modifiable risk factors**
The American Heart Association has identified several risk factors. Some of them can be modified, treated or controlled, and some can't.
- **Risk calculations**
The more risk factors you have, the greater your chance of developing coronary heart disease. Also, the greater the level of each risk factor, the greater the risk. For example, a person with a total cholesterol of 300 mg/dL has a greater risk than someone with a total cholesterol of 245 mg/dL, even though everyone with a total cholesterol greater than 240 is considered high-risk.

Assess your risk of having a heart attack or dying from coronary heart disease in the next 10 years with the [Heart Attack Risk Calculator](#).

Risk Factors and Coronary Heart Disease

Extensive clinical and statistical studies have identified several factors

Major risk factors that can't be changed

The risk factors on this list are ones you're born with and cannot be changed. The more of these risk factors you have, the greater your chance of developing [coronary heart disease](#). Since you can't do anything about these risk factors, it's even more important for you to manage the risk factors that can be changed.

Increasing Age

About 82 percent of people who die of coronary heart disease are 65 or older. At older ages, women who have heart attacks are more likely than men are to die from them within a few weeks.

Male Sex (Gender)

Men have a greater [risk of heart attack](#) than women do, and they have attacks earlier in life. Even after menopause, when women's death rate from heart disease increases, it's not as great as men's.

Heredity (Including Race)

Children of parents with heart disease are more likely to develop it themselves. African Americans have more severe high blood pressure than Caucasians and 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. Most people with a strong family history of heart disease have one or more other risk factors. Just as you can't control your age, sex and race, you can't control your family history. Therefore, it's even more important to treat and control any other risk factors you have.

Major risk factors you can modify, treat or control by changing your lifestyle or taking medicine

Heart Attack

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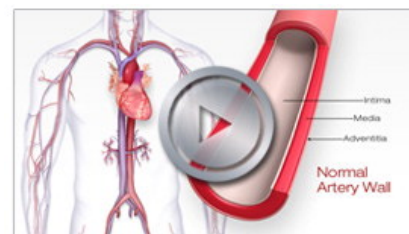
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What's Your Risk?

Heart Attack Risk Assessment

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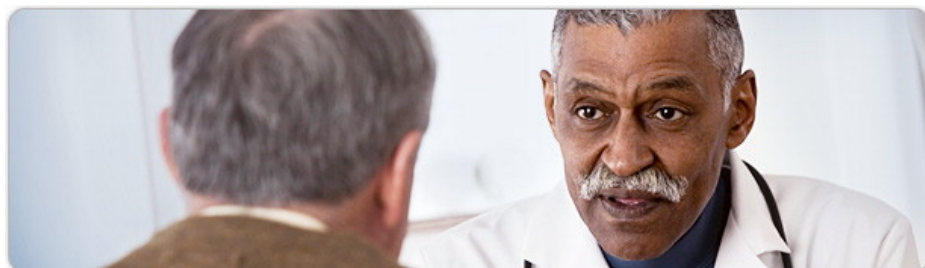
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Tobacco smoke

Smokers' risk of developing [coronary heart disease](#) is 2-4 times that of nonsmokers. People who smoke a pack of cigarettes a day have more than twice the risk of heart attack than people who've never smoked. Cigarette smoking is a powerful independent risk factor for sudden cardiac death in patients with coronary heart disease. Cigarette smoking also acts with other risk factors to greatly increase the risk for coronary heart disease. People who smoke cigars or pipes seem to have a higher risk of death from coronary heart disease (and possibly stroke) but their risk isn't as great as cigarette smokers'. Exposure to other people's smoke increases the risk of heart disease even for nonsmokers.

[Learn about smoking and cardiovascular disease](#)

[Visit our Quitting Smoking area for plans, tips and tools to help you quit](#)

High blood cholesterol

As blood cholesterol rises, so does risk of coronary heart disease. When other risk factors (such as high blood pressure and tobacco smoke) are present, this risk increases even more. A person's cholesterol level is also affected by age, sex, heredity and diet. Here's the lowdown on where those numbers need to be:

Total Cholesterol: Less than 200 mg/dL

LDL (bad) Cholesterol:

If you're at low risk for heart disease: Less than 160 mg/dL

If you're at intermediate risk for heart disease: Less than 130 mg/dL

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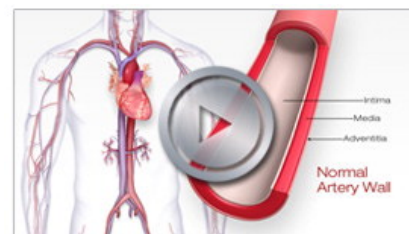
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If you're at high risk for heart disease (including those with existing heart disease or diabetes): Less than 100mg/dL

HDL (good) Cholesterol: 40 mg/dL or higher for men and 50 mg/dL or higher for women

Triglycerides: Less than 150 mg/dL

[Visit our Cholesterol website](#)

High blood pressure

High blood pressure increases the heart's workload, causing the heart muscle to thicken and become stiffer. This stiffening of the heart muscle is not normal, and causes the heart not to work properly. It also increases your risk of stroke, heart attack, kidney failure and congestive heart failure. When high blood pressure exists with obesity, smoking, high blood cholesterol levels or diabetes, the risk of heart attack or stroke increases several times.

[Visit our High Blood Pressure website](#)

[Take our Blood Pressure Risk Assessment](#)

Physical inactivity

An inactive lifestyle is a risk factor for coronary heart disease. Regular, moderate-to-vigorous physical activity helps prevent heart and blood vessel disease. The more vigorous the activity, the greater your benefits. However, even moderate-intensity activities help if done regularly and long term. Physical activity can help control blood cholesterol, diabetes and obesity, as well as help lower blood pressure in some people.

[Visit our Physical Activity and Fitness website](#)

[Start! a walking program](#)

Obesity and overweight

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 because often the blood pressure is higher. 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. Many obese and overweight people may have difficulty losing weight. But by losing even 10% from your current weight, you can lower your heart disease risk.

[Visit our Weight Management website](#)

Diabetes mellitus

Diabetes seriously increases your risk of developing cardiovascular disease. Even when glucose levels are under control, diabetes increases the risk of heart disease and stroke, but the risks are even greater if blood sugar is not well controlled. At least 65% of people with diabetes die of some form of heart or blood vessel disease. If you have diabetes, it's extremely important to work with your healthcare provider to manage it and control any other risk factors you can. Persons who are obese or overweight should lose weight to keep blood sugar in control.

[Visit our Heart of Diabetes website](#)

[Other factors that contribute to heart disease risk](#)

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Smoking and Cardiovascular Disease

Learn the Risks

Cigarette smoking is the most important preventable cause of premature death in the United States. It accounts for more than 440,000 of the more than 2.4 million annual deaths. Cigarette smokers have a higher risk of developing several chronic disorders. These include fatty buildups in arteries, several types of cancer and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (lung problems). Atherosclerosis (buildup of fatty substances in the arteries) is a chief contributor to the high number of deaths from smoking. Many studies detail the evidence that cigarette smoking is a major cause of coronary heart disease, which leads to heart attack.

[How does smoking affect coronary heart disease risk?](#)

[What about cigarette smoking and stroke and peripheral arterial disease?](#)

[What about cigar and pipe smoking?](#)

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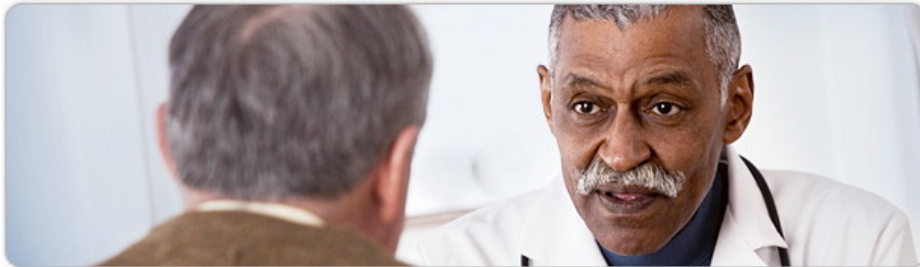
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Other factors that contribute to heart disease risk

Stress

Individual response to stress may be a contributing factor. Some scientists have noted a relationship between [coronary heart disease](#) risk and stress in a person's life, their health behaviors and socioeconomic status. These factors may affect established risk factors. For example, people under stress may overeat, start smoking or smoke more than they otherwise would.

[Get stress management tips and tools](#)

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 is lower than in nondrinkers. If you drink, limit your alcohol consumption to no more than two drinks per day for men and no more than one drink per day for women. One drink is defined as 1-1/2 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.

[Read our recommendation on alcohol, wine and cardiovascular disease](#)

Diet and Nutrition

A healthy diet is one of the best weapons you have to fight cardiovascular disease. The food you eat (and the

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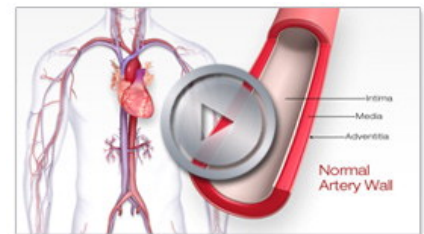
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amount) can affect other controllable risk factors: cholesterol, blood pressure, diabetes and overweight. Choose nutrient-rich foods — which have vitamins, minerals, fiber and other nutrients but are lower in calories — over nutrient-poor foods. A diet rich in vegetables, fruits, whole-grain and high-fiber foods, fish, lean protein and fat-free or low-fat dairy products is the key. And to maintain a healthy weight, coordinate your diet with your physical activity level so you're using up as many calories as you take in.

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About Us

Our mission is to build healthier lives, free of cardiovascular diseases and stroke. That single purpose drives all we do. The need for our work is beyond question. [More](#)



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