

Coronary Heart Disease: Reducing Your Risk

What is coronary heart disease?

Coronary heart disease (also called CHD) is sometimes called coronary artery disease. A coronary artery is a blood vessel that carries blood to your heart. Arteries are like narrow tubes. A fatty substance called plaque can build up in your arteries, blocking or slowing the flow of blood and oxygen through them. This can happen in any artery, but when it happens in the coronary arteries, your heart doesn't get the blood and oxygen it needs to work properly and you could have a heart attack.

What causes CHD?

Both men and women can get CHD. It can be hereditary (run in your family). It might also develop as you get older and plaque builds up in your arteries over the years. You may get CHD if you are overweight or if you have high blood pressure, high cholesterol or diabetes. Unhealthy habits -- such as smoking, eating a high-fat diet and not exercising enough -- can also lead to CHD. Lifestyle changes like the ones listed below can help lower your risk of CHD.

What can I do to lower my risk of CHD?

- Don't smoke. Nicotine raises your blood pressure because it causes your body to release adrenaline, which makes your blood vessels constrict and your heart beat faster. If you smoke, ask your doctor to help you make a plan to quit. After 2 or 3 years of not smoking, your risk of CHD will be as low as the risk of a person who never smoked.
- 1. Lower your low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol. LDL cholesterol is a "bad" form of cholesterol that can build up in your arteries. Eating a healthy, low-fat diet is a good way to start. Try to keep your daily fat calories to less than 30% of your total calories. For adults, this means eating less than 60 grams of fat per day. Some people may also need to take medicine to lower their LDL cholesterol.
- 1. Control your blood pressure. If you have high blood pressure, your doctor can suggest ways to lower it. If you're taking medicine for high blood pressure, be sure to take it just the way your doctor tells you to.
- 1. Exercise. Regular exercise can make your heart stronger and reduce your risk of heart disease. Exercise can also help if you have high blood pressure. Before you start, talk to your doctor about the right kind of exercise for you. Try to exercise 4 to 6 times a week for at least 30 minutes each time.
- 1. Ask your doctor about taking a low dose of aspirin each day. Aspirin helps prevent CHD, but taking it also has some risks.
- 1. Ask your doctor about taking vitamin supplements. Some studies have shown that vitamin E may lower a person's risk of having a heart attack. Other vitamins may also help protect against CHD.

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