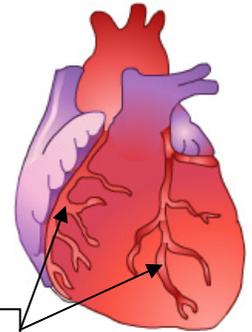


Introduction

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States. There are things you can do to reduce your risk of having heart disease. This reference summary will help you better understand heart disease. It will also show you ways to keep your heart healthy.



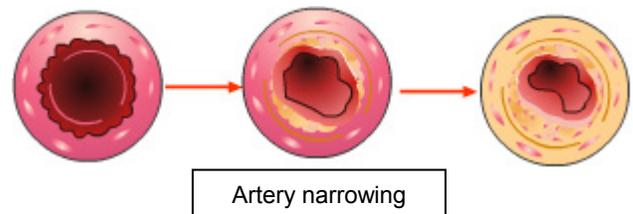
The Heart

The heart is the most important muscle in the body. It continuously pumps blood throughout the body. Blood carries nutrients and oxygen. The heart also needs nutrients and oxygen. The heart pumps blood to itself through arteries. The arteries that supply blood to the heart are called “coronary arteries.”

Narrowing of the Coronary Arteries

Healthy coronary arteries have smooth linings, allowing blood to flow smoothly. Damage to the lining of the coronary arteries makes them rough.

Fatty substances such as cholesterol can stick to the rough lining and collect in the arteries. As a result, plaque is formed on the inner walls of the arteries. Plaque and deposits of cholesterol on the walls of the coronary arteries usually causes them to narrow. This is called atherosclerosis.



Angina, Heart Attack, and Stroke

Narrowing of the arteries can lead to a decrease in blood supply to the heart. When blood flow to the heart decreases, there may be a feeling of chest pain, heaviness, or shortness of breath.

This is known as “angina.” The pain can be located in the stomach area, the middle of the back, the left arm, or the jaw.

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When the narrowing is severe enough, blood flow may be totally blocked. This causes a heart attack. During a heart attack, the part of the heart that does not receive blood dies. It is then difficult for the heart to pump blood to the rest of the body. A heart attack may occur without any exertion. The symptoms are similar to those of angina.

Sometimes, a piece of plaque from a narrowed artery can detach and move up to an artery in the brain. It blocks the artery and stops the blood supply to that part of the brain. This is known as a brain attack or a stroke.

A stroke could lead to coma or death. The signs of a stroke include the following:

1. A sudden numbness or weakness in the face, arm, or leg, especially on one side of the body.
2. Sudden confusion or trouble speaking or understanding.
3. Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes.
4. Difficulty walking, dizziness, or loss of balance and coordination.
5. A severe headache with no known cause.



If you see or have any of these symptoms, call 911. Treatment can be more effective if given quickly. Every minute counts.

Fortunately, lifestyle changes may prevent further damage to the coronary arteries.

Preventing Coronary Artery Disease

Your cardiac rehabilitation specialist or healthcare provider will explain and answer questions about risk factors for coronary artery disease. A risk factor is something that increases your chance of having a disease.

Some risk factors for heart disease cannot be controlled:

- Age: men aged 45 or older and women aged 55 or older
- Family history: heart disease in a father or brother before age 55 or in a mother or sister before age 65.

Fortunately, you can control many of the factors that contribute to the narrowing of the coronary arteries.

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The major risk factors for atherosclerosis are:

1. Unhealthy cholesterol levels
2. Smoking
3. Lack of exercise
4. Stress
5. Overweight or obesity
6. Diabetes



The following sections will explain how you can prevent coronary artery disease through diet, exercise, and avoiding risky behaviors.

Eating Healthy

Eating food low in cholesterol helps to decrease the cholesterol and fat levels in the blood. The food we eat can contain saturated fats and unsaturated fats.

Unsaturated fats are healthier than saturated fats. Saturated fats are present in dairy products such as whole milk products, butter, and cheeses.

Eat more white meat and white fish instead of red meat and shellfish. Red meat and shellfish are very high in cholesterol and fat. Grilling is healthier than frying.

Egg yolk contains very high levels of cholesterol. The white of the eggs, however, contains no fat or cholesterol. Eat a lot of fruits and vegetables.

Controlling Blood Pressure

High blood pressure, also called hypertension, contributes to the narrowing of the blood vessels of the heart, brain, and kidneys. It can lead to heart attacks, strokes, and kidney failure.

Hypertension may not have any symptoms. It is important to have your blood pressure checked frequently.



People with high blood pressure should limit their salt intake. Salt tends to increase blood pressure, which increases the chance of narrowing of the arteries. There are many salt substitutes that can provide excellent taste without harmful salt.

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Quitting Smoking

Smoking is a major risk factor that causes heart disease, as well as lung cancer, emphysema, and strokes.

Quitting is difficult. Fortunately, many programs have been developed to help you stop smoking.

Your cardiac rehabilitation specialist can help choose the program best suited for you.

Exercising

Exercising leads to weight loss, which may lower your total cholesterol levels and blood pressure.

If you have heart disease, check with your doctor before starting an exercise program.

You should exercise regularly. Building a fitness program into your daily or weekly schedule will help ensure that you will continue with it.

Overweight

Being overweight or obese can also contribute to heart disease, as well as diabetes and hypertension.

A well-balanced diet and regular exercise can help you lose unwanted pounds.

Losing weight should be done slowly, not in a “crash diet.” For example, it is better to lose 20 pounds in a year and keep it off than lose weight very quickly and gain it back.

Your healthcare provider or nutritionist can help you achieve this goal. However, it is up to you to implement it.

Managing Stress

Heart attacks are more common in people who do not cope well with stress. Though you cannot always control things that cause you stress, you can learn how to manage stress. This will help you reduce the risks of having heart disease.



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To manage stress, you should first recognize and list the situations that cause you stress. Once you identify the situations that cause you stress, you have several options for coping.

Sometimes, avoiding stressful situations can be a solution. If traffic jams upset you, try to avoid driving during rush hours.

Sometimes it is not possible to avoid situations that cause stress. In such cases, you can practice making a stressful situation positive. For instance, you can use rush hour traffic as an opportunity to listen to your favorite music.



Learning to relax is a good way to manage stress. Relaxation techniques include breathing slowly and deeply, visualizing yourself in relaxing scenes, meditation, and praying.

Exercising regularly is an excellent way to reduce stress. Getting enough sleep may also eliminate some stress caused by fatigue.

Knowing Your Other Risk Factors

Other risk factors can also contribute to heart disease. Family history of heart disease increases the chances of having heart problems.

People with diabetes have a higher risk of having heart disease. Diabetes is a disease where the body is unable to handle digested food adequately. This causes a rise in blood glucose, also called blood sugar.

The causes of diabetes are not known. However, by knowing that it is a risk factor for narrowing of the coronary arteries, you can be tested. If detected early, diabetes may be prevented or delayed through diet, medication, exercise, and weight loss. Diabetes can be controlled through diet, medication, exercise, and weight loss.

Summary

Heart disease is a common condition that affects millions of Americans. You can do a lot to help prevent heart disease. The key to a healthier lifestyle is eating healthy, exercising, quitting smoking, and relieving stress. These lifestyle changes are necessary to help prevent further heart problems.

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You may still need medications to treat high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol and/or diabetes if you have these conditions and if they do not respond to lifestyle changes.

It is easier to make these changes with the help of family members, friends, or support groups.

If you have heart disease, check with your doctor and healthcare providers. They will plan exercise and diet programs that fit your needs.



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