



Your Guide to a Healthy Heart

Introduction

Heart disease is a term used to describe several conditions, many of which are related to plaque buildup in the walls of the arteries. As the plaque builds up, your arteries narrow, making it more difficult for blood to flow and creating a risk for heart attack, stroke, and heart failure.

Heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women not only in the U.S., but also worldwide. But it doesn't have to be. Take control of your heart health by taking the necessary steps to protect your heart from disease. The following document serves as a guide as you steer your way towards a healthy heart.



Heart disease accounts for 1 in 7 deaths in the U.S.



Section 1: Recognizing and Treating Heart Disease

Heart disease isn't just one disease, but rather a number of conditions that affect the heart's ability to function normally. Some of the conditions are:

- Coronary artery disease
- Heart attack
- Abnormal heart rhythms or arrhythmias
- Heart failure
- Heart valve disease
- Congenital heart disease
- Heart muscle disease or cardiomyopathy
- Vascular or blood vessel disease

Symptoms of heart disease vary depending on the specific condition. Always seek emergency medical care if you ever experience chest pain, shortness of breath or fainting.

The goals of treatment for heart disease are to relieve symptoms, reduce additional risk factors to slow the buildup of plaque, widen coronary arteries, and prevent complications. Treatment can include lifestyle changes, medicines, surgical procedures, and cardiac rehabilitation.

Section 2: Identifying Risk Factors

Risk factors are things that increase your chances for developing heart disease. The most important thing you can do to improve heart health is to identify your own heart disease risk and learn the steps you can take to control that risk. While there are some risk factors you can't control (family history, age, gender), there are factors you can control. These items include:

- **Smoking.** Smoking is the most preventable cause of disease and death in the United States. According to research, your lungs begin to heal themselves as soon as you stop smoking.
- **High blood pressure.** Blood pressure is a measure of how hard the blood pushes against the walls of your arteries as it moves through your body. When blood pressure is high, it starts to damage the blood vessels, heart, and kidneys.



Will smoking increase my risk for heart attack?

- **High cholesterol.** Cholesterol is a type of fat in your blood. If you have too much, it can build up in your arteries and increase your risk of heart disease and stroke.
- **Diabetes.** Diabetes is a condition that affects how insulin is produced and used in the body. Over time, this condition can speed up the hardening and narrowing of the coronary arteries.
- **Being overweight.** There is a direct correlation between being overweight and being at risk for heart disease. Being overweight also increases other risk factors, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and high cholesterol.
- **Lack of exercise.** If you are inactive, you have a higher risk of heart disease. Being active helps keep your heart and blood vessels healthy and working properly.
- **Stress.** Your stress level can be bad for your heart. It can raise your blood pressure and your heart rate, making your heart work harder and increasing your risk for heart attack.
- **Metabolic syndrome.** Metabolic syndrome is a combination of metabolic disorders that raise the risk for heart disease. Risk factors include too much fat around the waist, high blood pressure, elevated blood sugar, high cholesterol, and high levels of triglycerides.
- **Sleep apnea.** Sleep apnea is a disorder in which a person briefly stops breathing during sleep. Left untreated, people with sleep apnea are more likely to develop high blood pressure, heart attack, congestive heart failure, and stroke.

Screenings to Control Your Heart Health

Heart screenings can help you successfully manage your heart health. To determine whether you are at risk for a heart problem, you should be aware of five key numbers:

- total cholesterol
- HDL (good) cholesterol
- blood pressure
- blood sugar
- body mass index (BMI)

Blood pressure – Blood pressure readings consist of an upper number (systolic) and a lower number (diastolic). High blood pressure (140/90 or higher) can lead to heart attack, stroke, and other problems.

 About 80 million U.S. adults have high blood pressure.

Cholesterol – Knowing your total cholesterol and HDL (good) cholesterol can give you a general idea about your cholesterol levels. If your total cholesterol is 200 mg/dL or more, or if your HDL is less than 40 mg/dL, you will need to have a more extensive lipoprotein profile done.

 About 43% of Americans have total cholesterol higher of 200 mg/dL or higher.

Blood Sugar – A blood glucose test measures the amount of sugar in your blood. High blood sugar can damage the walls of your arteries, leading to a narrowing or blockage of your arteries.

 Diabetes rates are growing; about 35% of Americans have pre-diabetes.

Body mass index – Your BMI is a measure of body fat based on height and weight; the higher your BMI, the higher your risk for heart disease. To calculate your BMI:

1. Multiply your weight in pounds by 703.
2. Multiply your height in inches by itself (i.e. inches squared).
3. Divide the number from step 1 by the number in step 2.

Condition	Normal	High
High Blood Pressure	120 systolic / 80 diastolic	140 systolic / 90 diastolic
Total Cholesterol	Less than 200mg/dL	240 mg/dL and above
LDL Cholesterol	Less than 100 mg/dL	160 mg/dL and above
HDL Cholesterol	60 mg/dL and above	Less than 40 mg/dL
Triglycerides	Less than 150 mg/dL	200 mg/dL and above
Blood Glucose	Under 99 mg/dL	126 mg/dL and above
Body Mass Index (BMI)	18.5 – 24.9	30 or greater

 Roughly 69% of U.S. adults are overweight or obese.

Other Heart Tests

There are additional [heart tests](#) available that will help your doctor decide if you're at risk for a heart problem. Most are noninvasive and can help doctors determine what's causing your symptoms. Talk with your doctor to decide if a test is right for you.

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

Your doctor may talk with you about your risk for heart and blood flow problems, including heart attack and stroke. You and your doctor can then decide whether you need to lower your risk and what treatment is best for you. Getting answers to the following questions will give you information about your heart health and what you can do to improve it. Bring these questions with you on your next visit to your doctor's office.



Am I at risk for a [heart attack](#)?


1. Am I at risk for heart disease?
2. What is my blood pressure reading and what do I need to do about it?
3. What do my cholesterol numbers mean for me and what should I do about them?
4. What is my body mass index (BMI)? Do I need to lose weight for my health?
5. Does my blood sugar level mean I'm at risk for diabetes?
6. What other heart disease screenings do I need?
7. How often should I return for checkups for my heart health?
8. What are the warning signs of heart disease and stroke?
9. How can I tell if I'm having a heart attack?
10. (If you smoke) What can you do to help me quit smoking?
11. How much physical activity do I need to help protect my heart?
What kinds of activities are helpful?
12. What is a heart healthy eating plan for me? Should I see a registered dietitian or qualified nutritionist to learn more about healthy eating?

Section 3: Managing Heart Health

Introducing and maintaining a heart healthy lifestyle is key to lowering your heart disease risk. There are several things you can do to avoid or lower your risk for heart disease, heart attack and stroke. These include following a diet low in saturated fat and eating plenty of fruits, vegetables, legumes, and heart-healthy fats; managing stress; and engaging in regular exercise.

Create a Heart-Healthy Lifestyle

If you are worried about heart disease, one of the most important things you can do is to maintain a healthy weight and begin eating a heart-healthy diet. Changing your diet can help stop or even reverse heart disease. A heart-healthy diet includes:

- **Eating fruits and vegetables.** Eat a variety of fruit and vegetable servings every day. Dark green, deep orange, and yellow fruits and vegetables are especially nutritious. Examples include spinach, carrots, peaches, and berries.
 - **Eating a variety of grain products every day.** Include whole-grain foods that have a lot of fiber and nutrients. Examples of whole grains include oats, whole wheat bread, and brown rice.
 - **Limiting saturated fat and cholesterol.** To limit saturated fat and cholesterol, try to choose the following foods:
 - Lean meats and meat alternatives, such as beans or tofu
 - Fish, vegetables, beans, and nuts
 - Nonfat and low-fat dairy products
 - **Limiting the amount of trans fat you eat.** Trans fat raises the levels of LDL (bad) cholesterol and also lowers HDL (good) cholesterol in the blood. Trans fat is found in many processed foods made with shortening or with partially hydrogenated or hydrogenated vegetable oils. These foods include cookies, crackers, chips, and many snack foods.
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- A vibrant assortment of fresh fruits and vegetables, including carrots, broccoli, apples, and bell peppers, arranged in a pile. The image shows a variety of colors and textures, emphasizing the freshness and variety of the produce.





You don't have to give up your favorite recipes in order to be healthy. Simple substitutions can make all the difference for a heart-healthy lifestyle.

- **Choosing healthy fats.** Unsaturated fats, such as olive, canola, corn, and sunflower oils, are part of a healthy diet. But all fats are high in calories, so watch your serving sizes.
- **Limiting sodium.** For good health, less is best. This is especially important for people who are at risk for, or already have, high blood pressure. Try to limit sodium to 2,300 mg a day. If you are African-American, have diabetes or chronic kidney disease, or are older than age 50, try to limit the amount of salt you eat to less than 1,500 mg a day.
- **Eating only as many calories as you need to stay at a healthy weight.** Learn how much is considered a serving, and then check your portion sizes. If you want to lose weight, increase your activity level to burn more calories than you eat.
- **Drinking alcohol in moderation.** If you drink, limit alcohol intake to 2 drinks a day for men and 1 drink a day for women.

Quit Smoking

Quitting smoking is hard, but you can do it. The good news is that you don't have to do it alone. Ask your family, friends, and doctor to help you. Some ways to help you on your smoke-free journey include:

- **Preparation.** If you like to plan ahead, set a date to quit. Pick a time when you won't have a lot of stress in your life. Talk to your partner and friends about helping you stay smoke-free. Don't let people smoke in your house.
- **A change in routine.** For example, if you smoke after eating, take a walk instead.
- **Medication.** Medicine can help with cravings and stress, and can increase your chances for success. You can buy nicotine gum, lozenges, or patches without a prescription. Your doctor may also prescribe medicine.
- **Support.** Seek help from:
 - Mercy's [Road to Freedom](#) tobacco cessation program
 - The National Network of Tobacco Cessation quitline: 1-800-QUIT NOW (1-800-784-8669).
 - Free smartphone, tablet, or handheld computer apps, such as the National Cancer Institute's QuitPal.
 - Internet programs, such as www.smokefree.gov, which also have chat rooms.
 - Doctors, nurses, or therapists for counseling.
 - A friend who has quit smoking.



Take this [quiz](#) to learn how smoking affects your chance of having a heart attack in the next 10 years.

Stay Active

Staying active can improve your health. It is good for your heart, lungs, bones, muscles, and joints; it also lowers your risk for falls, heart attack, diabetes, high blood pressure, and some cancers. If you already have one or more of these problems, getting fit may help you control other health problems and make you feel better.

Moderate physical activity is safe for most people. But it's always a good idea to talk to your doctor before becoming more active, especially if you haven't been very active or have health problems.

If you're ready to add more physical activity to your life, here are some tips to get you started:

- **Make physical activity part of your regular day.** Make a regular habit of using stairs, not elevators, and walking to do errands near your home.
- **Start walking.** Walking is a great fitness activity that most people can start right away. Take a daily walk with family members, friends, coworkers, or pets.
- **Find an activity partner.** This can make exercising more fun and hold you accountable.
- **Find an activity that you enjoy, and stick with it.** Vary it with other activities so you don't get bored.

It doesn't take much to become active. Experts say to do either of these things to get and stay healthy:

- Do some sort of moderate aerobic activity, like brisk walking, for at least 2½ hours each week. It is best to be active at least 3 days a week, for at least 10 minutes at a time. For example, you could:
 - Take a 10-minute walk 3 times a day. Do this 5 days a week.
 - Take a half-hour walk 3 days a week. On the other 4 days, take a 15-minute walk.
 - Take a 45-minute walk every other day.
- Do more vigorous activities, like running, for at least 1¼ hours a week. This activity makes you breathe harder and have a much faster heartbeat than when you are resting. It is better to be active at least 3 days a week for at least 10 minutes at a time. For example, you could:
 - Run for 25 minutes 3 times a week.
 - Run for 15 minutes 5 times a week.



Find out how many calories
you burn during exercise
with our [interactive tool](#).



Section 4: Choosing the Right Heart & Vascular Center Could Save Your Life!

At Mercy, our cardiac care program offers comprehensive services, a wide variety of treatment options, and advanced technologies to diagnose and treat heart disease. We provide the highest quality of patient care and work with you and your primary care doctor at every stage of the process. Mercy's Heart and Vascular team of specially trained cardiologists, technologists, and nurses will provide you with the very best heart care, so you can do more of what you love.

Mercy is proud to be ranked as one of the top five large health systems in the nation, according to the 2016 Truven Health 15 Top Health Systems. The 2016 study analyzed 338 health systems and 2,912 hospitals that are members of health systems. The winners outperformed their peers in a number of ways, including shorter hospital stays, fewer complications, and better patient results.

Mercy brings specialized heart care for patients, focusing on prevention, to help you lower your risk of heart disease. Screenings also help us find heart problems before they grow serious. When treatment is unavoidable, our [board-certified physicians](#) and care team treat a variety of heart-related conditions, with full access to the latest advances in cardiac care. Find a [Mercy Heart and Vascular Health location](#) near you.