

# Preventing Coronary Heart Disease

## Preventing heart disease through lifestyle changes.

Experts agree the decline in death rates from heart disease in the United States is due in part to the public's adopting a healthier lifestyle. Many deaths associated with heart disease are preventable. Many aspects of lifestyles are the key to prevention of coronary heart disease (CHD). By making healthier lifestyle choices, you hold the key to lowering your risk for developing and preventing illness and death from CHD.

The American Heart Association offers the following recommendations for lowering your risk of CHD:

1. **Quit smoking.** Cigarette smoking is considered the biggest risk factor for sudden cardiac death. A smokers' risk of heart attack is more than twice that of a nonsmoker. Smokers who do suffer a heart attack are more likely to die than are nonsmokers who have had a heart attack. By quitting smoking, you can immediately reduce your risk for heart disease.
2. **Control your blood pressure.** High blood pressure causes your heart to work harder. Over time, the heart enlarges. This increases the risk of heart attack, heart failure, stroke and kidney failure. Have your blood pressure checked regularly. Medication may be needed when lifestyle changes aren't enough to keep blood pressure within normal range (less than 120/80).
3. **Control your blood cholesterol.** As levels of cholesterol rise in the blood, the risk for CHD increases. By adopting a diet that is lower in saturated fat and cholesterol, you can reduce your cholesterol. When diet changes aren't enough, prescription medications may be needed. Cholesterol (low density lipoprotein, or "bad" cholesterol) LDL levels should be no higher than 160 mg/dL if no more than one risk factor is present or less than 130 mg/dL if two or more risk factors are present. LDL cholesterol should be less than 100 mg/dL in people with a history of heart attack, stroke or diabetes. HDL (high-density lipids, or "good" cholesterol) greater than 40 mg/dL and triglycerides less than 150 mg/dL are recommended.
4. **Increase your physical activity.** Studies have shown that moderate exercise, when done regularly, can reduce your risk for heart disease. Regular exercise can also help to reduce your cholesterol levels and blood pressure, as well as decrease your risk for developing diabetes and obesity. It makes sense to become more physically active. Check with your doctor to see which type of exercise is best for you.
5. **Maintain a healthy body weight.** People with excess body fat are more likely to develop CHD. Obesity not only puts too much strain on the heart but it can also affect blood pressure and cholesterol and increase your risk for diabetes. Even modest weight loss (10 to 20 pounds) can reduce your risk of heart disease and diabetes. A body mass index (BMI) of 21 to 25 is recommended. BMI is a figure based on your height and weight and is recognized by the National Institutes of Health and the World Health Organization as the best standard to judge obesity.
6. **Maintain normal blood sugar levels.** Diabetes increases your risk of developing heart disease, even when your blood sugars are kept under control. If you have diabetes, it is very important for you to monitor and control as many risk factors for coronary heart disease as you can.
7. **Reduce stress.** Some researchers have noted a connection between CHD and stress. Although scientists still do not know exactly how stress might increase your risk for heart disease, it is generally considered wise to try to manage stress as much as possible, especially if you are more likely to over-eat, smoke or drink too much alcohol.