

Risk Factors for Heart Disease and Your Numbers

Extensive clinical and statistical studies have identified several factors that increase the risk of coronary heart disease and heart attack. Major risk factors are those that research has shown significantly increase the risk of heart and blood vessel (cardiovascular) disease. The American Heart Association has identified several risk factors. Some of them can be modified, treated or controlled, and some can't. 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.

What are some of the major risk factors you can modify, treat or control by changing your lifestyle or taking medicine? Here are some related to *Your Numbers* according to the American Heart Association.

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.

High blood pressure — High blood pressure increases the heart's workload, causing the heart to thicken and become stiffer. 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.

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. 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 as few as 10 pounds, you can lower your heart disease risk.

Diabetes mellitus — Diabetes seriously increases your risk of developing cardiovascular disease. Even when glucose (blood sugar) 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. About three-quarters 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.

You can learn a lot about your heart with a few simple numbers. When you know what numbers indicate a strong, healthy heart, you can set goals that reduce your risk for heart disease and stroke. The following will help you learn

which numbers are important and what goals you need to reach to keep your heart healthy and strong.

TOTAL CHOLESTEROL: Less than 200 mg/dL

LDL ("BAD") CHOLESTEROL

(There are different goals for each level of risk for heart disease)

People who are at low risk for heart disease:

Less than 160 mg/dL

People at intermediate risk for heart disease:

Less than 130 mg/dL

People at high risk for heart disease including those who have heart disease or diabetes:

Less than 100 mg/dL

People at very high risk for heart disease:

Less than 70 mg/dL

HDL ("GOOD") CHOLESTEROL

Women: 50 mg/dL or higher

Men: 40 mg/dL or higher

TRIGLYCERIDES

Less than 150 mg/dL

BLOOD PRESSURE

Less than 120/80 mmHg

FASTING GLUCOSE

Less than 100 mg/dL

BODY MASS INDEX (BMI)

Less than 25

WAIST CIRCUMFERENCE

Women: 35 inches or less

Men: 40 inches or less

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