

Are You Putting Your Heart Health at Risk?

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Heart disease and other cardiac problems can be devastating for anyone who experiences them. They can be terrifying because they're potentially fatal. But many types of heart disease don't have to be a death sentence.

The heart is one of the most critical organs in your body. If your heart stops working, you will die without medical intervention. You can't live without the heart because it pumps blood through your body, sending it to your brain and other parts of the body that require it.

Without your heart, your other organs can't get any oxygen. Your brain can only live for a few minutes without it. If your brain is too seriously damaged, there's nothing doctors can do to bring you back.

Because the heart is so important, it's absolutely vital that you take care of it properly. You should do everything you can to protect it.

Heart Health Statistics You Need to Know

You probably realize how important your heart is. But you may think heart health tips don't apply to you. Let's look at a few statistics that might help you realize just how important this is to you:

- Heart disease is the biggest single cause of death of men AND women in the United States.
- More than 869,000 people died of heart disease in the U.S. in the year 2004. More women than men are affected by heart disease.
- Heart disease is the biggest cause of death for many races of people, including Caucasians, Hispanics, Alaska Natives, African Americans, and American Indians. For Asians and Pacific Islanders, the leading cause of death is cancer - but heart disease isn't far behind.

- African Americans have an average of 30% higher rates of heart disease than Caucasians.
- The leading type of heart disease is coronary heart disease. Almost 500,000 people died from coronary heart disease in 2004.
- About 47% of deaths due to heart related illnesses happen before the patient receives medical care from EMTs or hospital staff.
- More than 7,000,000 people are killed by coronary heart disease each year *worldwide*.
- Over one third of adults report having two or more of the six common risk factors for heart disease and stroke. Those are diabetes, smoking, physical inactivity, obesity, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure.
- 30.2% of people 20 and older have hypertension or are taking hypertension meds.
- 17.3% of people 20 and older have high cholesterol.
- 30.5% of people 20 and older are obese.
- 6.5% of people 20 and older have diabetes.
- 37.6% of people 18 and older get no physical activity during their leisure time.
- 21.6% of people 18 and older are smokers.
- Around 40,000 babies are born in the U.S. each year with congenital heart defects.
- Over half of deaths from congenital heart defects are in people under age 15.
- 36% of young athletes who experience sudden death die from hypertrophic cardiomyopathy.
- Over 30% of high school student report being smokers.
- Over 15,000,000 children under age 18 experience second hand smoke at home.

- Females age 4-19 have higher mean cholesterol and LDL cholesterol than males.
- Over half of high school students are enrolled in physical education classes, but less than one third attend those classes daily.
- 12% of Caucasian boys and 11.6% of Caucasian girls age 6-11 are overweight.
- 17.1% of African American boys and 22.2% of African American girls are 6-11 are overweight.
- 27.3% of Hispanic boys and 19.6% of Hispanic boys age 6-11 are overweight.
- The statistics of overweight children are even higher in those age 12-19.

With statistics like these, it's more critical than ever to start your children off with the right habits for heart health as early as possible. More and more children and young adults are dying from heart related issues each year.

And those statistics increase as those children age. You should make sure your children get enough exercise, eat a healthy diet that's rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and don't allow them to eat too much sugar or refined carbs.

Risk Factors for Heart Disease

There are a lot of risk factors for heart disease, but there are six major risk factors that everyone should pay attention to. These are the most common risk factors, accounting for the vast majority of heart disease. These six risk factors are diabetes, smoking, physical inactivity, obesity, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure.

Diabetes

Diabetes is a major risk factor for heart disease. For a long time, the medical community has known that high blood sugar can have a detrimental effect on the heart. Patients with diabetes have double to as much as quadruple the risk of dying of heart attack or stroke that someone who has already had a previous heart attack but doesn't have diabetes.

A recent study in the New England Journal of Medicine found evidence that lowering your blood sugar significantly can reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke by nearly half! This is most prominent in those with Type 1 diabetes, but there's an ongoing trial about whether or not controlling blood sugar levels could also halve the risk in patients with Type 2 diabetes. About 95% of the 20,000,000 Americans with diabetes have Type 2.

Unfortunately, a lot of people who have Type 2 diabetes don't even realize it until it's too late and the damage has already been done. Patients with heart disease might not even have their blood sugar levels checked, and people with diabetes may not routinely have their heart checked.

Smoking

It's been known for many years that smoking increases your risk of all types of diseases. It's a major cause of atherosclerosis, which is when fatty substances build up in the arteries. In patients with coronary artery disease, the arteries become narrowed, which decreases the supply of blood to the heart. This can lead to angina, and may even eventually lead to heart attack.

Peripheral artery disease is when there is atherosclerosis in the arteries that take blood to the extremities. This may cause intermittent claudication, which is a painful cramping in the legs when the patient is walking. It can also increase the risk of stroke.

Smokers are also at a much higher risk of heart attack than non-smokers. The longer a person smokes, the more that risk increases. People who smoke just one pack of cigarettes per day have more than two times the risk of heart attack than non-smokers.

Physical Inactivity

The heart is a muscle. When muscles aren't used much, they tend to atrophy. That means they shrink and aren't as strong as they could be. The heart can experience a similar effect. When people don't get a lot of exercise, their heart can stop working as well.

Regular physical activity, especially aerobic exercise, can help prevent cardiovascular disease, heart disease, and stroke. Lack of physical activity is

strongly linked to cardiovascular mortality. Physical activity can also control blood cholesterol, diabetes, blood pressure, and it can help prevent and correct obesity.

Obesity

Obesity is a major risk factor for many types of diseases. Coronary heart disease is one of these. There are several reasons why obesity can increase the risk of heart disease. For one thing, it can raise blood cholesterol and triglycerides.

It lowers HDL cholesterol, and raises LDL. It causes hypertension. It can cause some people to develop diabetes, which can significantly increase the risk of heart attack. Even when there are no other known risk factors, obesity alone increase a person's risk of developing heart disease.

High Cholesterol

High cholesterol is another major risk factor in coronary heart disease, which can lead to heart attack. Although cholesterol is necessary for many functions in the body, having too much of the wrong kind can lead to coronary disease.

Low density lipoprotein is the major carrier of cholesterol in the blood. If there's too much LDL in the blood, it can build up inside the arteries. This can lead to the formation of a hard deposit called plaque, and that can clog the arteries. If a blood clot forms near a plaque deposit, it can block the blood flow to the heart and cause a heart attack. If the clot dislodges and blocks blood flow to the brain, it causes a stroke.

A level of LDL cholesterol over 160 mg/dL puts you at an increase risk of heart disease. If you already have heart disease, your cholesterol should be even lower in an attempt to prevent a heart attack or stroke.

High Blood Pressure

High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, usually has no symptoms. Many people have it for many years without even knowing it. Unfortunately, this can have devastating consequences for those who have it and don't know. People who have prolonged and sustained hypertension can develop coronary heart disease, heart failure, stroke, kidney failure, and many other diseases.

Nearly one third of American adults have high blood pressure. It's very important to get your blood pressure checked regularly, even if you feel fine. Your blood pressure could start to rise at any time, so you should check it often.

Family History

Family history is a seventh risk factor that's often overlooked - probably because nothing can really be done about it. People with a family history of heart disease or heart attacks are much more likely to get it themselves than someone without a family history, even if they have no other risk factors at all!

So, you should be sure to ask your family about the possibility that you have heart disease in your lineage. Find out what killed the last several generations of your family, and don't forget about aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Find out how old they were when they died, as well. The more you know about your family history, the more you can prepare for things that might happen to you later. Your doctor will want to know about your family's heart health history as well.

The Devastating Effects of Heart Attack

Let's say you ignore all of the advice, and you continue smoking, overeating, and not getting enough exercise. What could happen to you if you do have a heart attack?

For one thing, many people just don't survive a heart attack. Only people who get prompt medical attention have a good chance of surviving a heart attack, and a lot of people just don't recognize the symptoms in time to get help.

If you *do* survive a heart attack, your life will probably never be the same. You may feel very fatigued for quite awhile after your heart attack. It can cause damage to the heart that might make it hard for you to breathe or perform your normal daily activities well. If the heart attack is rather prolonged, it might even cause damage to the brain if it can't get enough oxygen.

Once someone has a heart attack, his or her chance of having another heart attack is increased significantly. The risk of death increases with each subsequent heart attack, because the heart is damaged further with each one.

The best thing you can do is to prevent yourself from ever having a heart attack in the first place. Once you develop serious heart disease, it may be very difficult to prevent it from progressing. It's much better to keep yourself from developing heart disease than to try to keep it from getting worse later.

Surprising Facts about Children and Heart Attacks

It was once thought that heart attacks generally only occurred in people over age 40, but we're learning that isn't always true. Recent news stories have revealed the prevalence of heart attacks in children as young as 12 years of age may be on the rise.

Heart attacks in children are still extremely rare, but it can occur in children with problems such as Kawasaki's disease, cardiac trauma, and congenital heart defects. It may also happen if there's a viral infection in the heart, or if a tooth infection spreads.

Fortunately, the risk of a child having a heart attack is still quite low unless a congenital abnormality exists. But with high cholesterol, diabetes, and high blood pressure on the rise in children, their risk of heart attack could be rising along with it.

What You Should Be Doing

Preventing heart attacks is definitely preferable to trying to treat heart disease that's already developed. You should be doing everything you can to prevent yourself from developing cardiovascular disease in the first place.

If you have existing issues such as family history, high blood pressure, or congenital heart defects, then you need to be especially concerned. It's never too early to start caring for your heart, and to start your children on the road to long-term heart health.



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