Children and Heart Disease

Although the effects of heart disease may not be felt until later in life, research now shows that the risk begins in childhood. In fact, the Canadian Cardiovascular Congress recently revealed that children growing up in the U.S. and Canada are the first generation in modern history who may have a shorter life expectancy than their parents because of obesity. Today's children could start suffering from heart problems as early as their teenage years.

As a parent, you are your child's first line of defense against heart disease. What to do:

Eat meals together. Strive for a few home-cooked family meals each week to teach good eating habits. Make sure the house is stocked with healthy snacks and treats for times when the kids are on their own.

Get off the couch. Limit the time your children spend on the computer, watching television and playing video games. Encourage their participation in active pursuits — and don't forget to join in. Exercising as a family by riding bikes, playing softball or just tossing a Frisbee promotes togetherness as well as physical health.

Be a role model. Work to keep your own weight, blood pressure and cholesterol under control. Seeing a positive example early on can be a lifelong influence.

Raise a Glass?

A compound found in red wine (especially cabernet) may help reduce heart disease risk by inhibiting production of endothelin-1, a chemical that causes blood vessels to narrow. The same compound is found in purple grape juice, but it does not have as strong an effect on the cardiovascular system — possibly because red wine also dilates blood vessels. ***Caution:*** Only a small amount of red wine is associated with heart benefits, so easy does it. And if you don't drink, don't start.

Are You Ready for a Change?

The main way to a healthier heart is still lifestyle change, such as starting an exercise program, losing weight and giving up bad habits such as smoking. Use these questions to decide if you're ready to embark on a heart-healthier life.

1. How are you feeling? Small warning signs, such as feeling breathless when you walk up stairs or not having enough energy to play with your grandchildren, could be telling you it's time to get started on a lifestyle change program.

2. Are you looking for long-term goals instead of a quick fix? You're more likely to stick with small changes made slowly over time. For example, start out walking just 15 minutes a day. Or focus on one aspect of your diet, such as switching to low-fat milk or controlling portion sizes. Once you've achieved success with one goal, celebrate and move on to the next.

3. Are you willing to do things differently? Lifestyle change is all about experimenting — trying new activities, different foods, alternate ways of spending your time and having fun. When you break bad habits, you must replace them with new, healthy ones.

4. Do you have the patience to wait for results? Making lifestyle changes is a step-by-step process, and you may not feel improvement right away. But every little step takes you in the right direction.

5. Are you prepared to deal with setbacks? Whether you're quitting smoking, losing weight or trying to eat better, you'll most likely break down along the way. Realize that nobody's perfect, and that even if you lose a few battles, you can still win the war. When all is said and done, that's what counts.

Medical Editor: Zorba Paster, MD

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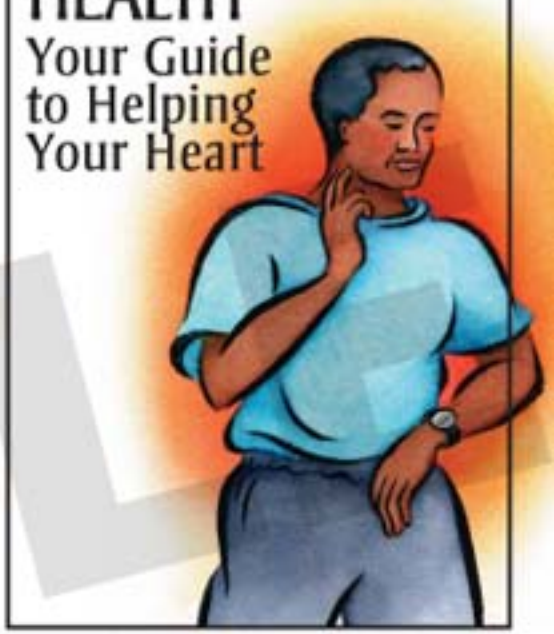
CARDIOVASCULAR HEALTH

Your Guide to Helping Your Heart



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HEART DISEASE: NEWS YOU CAN USE

What tools do you have at your disposal when it comes to lowering your risk for heart disease? An active life and a zest for exercise. A sensible, healthy diet that is low in fat and rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Support to manage stress and help you quit bad habits, such as smoking.

Don't forget another aspect of taking care of your heart: arming yourself with the latest information on cardiovascular disease.

Cardiovascular disease is still a killer, making it one of the most studied conditions in the medical community. That means you've got plenty of new information at hand to help you in your personal fight against this serious condition. The key is to use your doctor's expertise and publications like this to sort through and pick out the information you can use.

Start by knowing your risk factors for heart disease and talking with your doctor to devise a prevention plan that works for you. Learn all you can about medications, newly discovered risk factors and ways you can become inspired to stick with lifestyle change. Read on to find out more.

Trying Aspirin Therapy? Then Skip These

The Physician's Health Study found that taking some types of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) may counteract the benefits of taking aspirin to prevent heart attack. An occasional ibuprofen (Advil) or naproxen (Aleve) tablet probably won't hurt, but regular use of these medications diminishes aspirin's heart-protective qualities.

Beyond the Usual Suspects

While common culprits are to blame in 50–75 percent of cardiovascular problems, many low-risk people have heart attacks. These newly discovered risk factors may be at fault.

C-reactive protein. CRP is a sign of inflammation in the body, including cardiovascular inflammation. CRP is produced by the liver normally to help combat infection and inflammation. It may be a better predictor of heart attack risk than cholesterol levels, but more study is needed.

Homocysteine. Too much of this amino acid may cause artery linings to scar and thicken, contributing to stroke, blood vessel problems in the arms, legs and feet, and certain types of heart disease. To lower homocysteine levels, get plenty of folate and other B vitamins in your diet through green leafy vegetables and fortified grains.

Fibrinogen. This protein helps blood clot normally, but too much fibrinogen may lead to the arterial clots that cause heart attacks and strokes. Inactivity, alcohol consumption and taking hormone replacement therapy or birth control pills may raise fibrinogen levels.

Lipoprotein (a). When an LDL cholesterol particle attaches to a protein in the blood, it forms lipoprotein (a), high levels of which may make your body unable to dissolve blood clots normally. High lipoprotein (a) levels may increase risk of early heart disease, heart attack and stroke.

The bottom line: More study is needed to determine the exact role of these substances in heart disease. If you are concerned about your cardiovascular risk, talk with your doctor about blood tests that can detect levels of these new "suspects."

Heart-Helping Medications

BLOOD PRESSURE CONTROL: Diet and exercise are still the first lines of defense against high blood pressure. Your doctor may also prescribe one or more of the following medications.

- **Diuretics** are often the first medication prescribed to lower blood pressure. A diuretic is an oral drug that helps flush excess fluid and sodium out of the body.
- **ACE inhibitors** interfere with the body's production of angiotensin, a chemical that narrows arteries.
- **Angiotensin agonists** block the effects of angiotensin on the arteries.
- **Beta-blockers and calcium-channel blockers** reduce heart rate, relax blood vessels and lower the output of blood.
- **Vasodilators** widen blood vessels so the heart does not have to work as hard to pump blood.

What about combination therapy? According to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute's ALLHAT study, many people need more than one drug to help control blood pressure — often a diuretic combined with another medicine.

Note: Ideally, your blood pressure should be below 120/80 mm Hg. Hypertension may be diagnosed if you have several blood pressure readings of 140/90 or higher. In diabetics, the threshold is lower.

CHOLESTEROL CONTROL: A group of medications called "statins" are most frequently prescribed for high cholesterol. Studies have reported that statins lower LDL (low-density lipoprotein, or "bad" cholesterol) 20–60 percent. The American Heart Association recommends statins for people with LDL levels of 190 mg/dL or higher, 160 mg/dL or higher for those who have two or more heart disease risk factors.

IMPROVING BLOOD FLOW: If you are at risk for or already have heart disease, talk with your doctor about whether a daily aspirin can help you avoid a heart attack or stroke. Aspirin's blood-thinning properties help reduce the risk of complications and also may prevent a second attack. In fact, the first step toward surviving a heart attack could be right in your medicine cabinet: The American Heart Association recommends chewing one aspirin at the first sign of chest pain.

Remember: Medication alone isn't the answer. Drug therapy combined with a healthy diet, exercise, weight loss and stress reduction help ensure you'll keep your blood flowing and heart beating strong for a lifetime.

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