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. 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:

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. Exercising as a family by riding bikes, playing softball or just tossing a Frisbee promotes togetherness as well as physical health.

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.

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.

Are You Ready for a Change?

Use these questions to decide if you're ready to embark on a heart-healthier life.

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.

Are you satisfied with 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. 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.

Are you willing to do things differently?

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

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.

CARDIOVASCULAR HEALTH

Your Guide to Helping Your Heart

HEART DISEASE DEFENSE

Cardiovascular disease is a killer, making it one of the most studied conditions in the medical community. Fighting heart disease depends on knowing your risk factors, learning all you can about the disease and talking with your doctor to devise a prevention plan that works for you.

Assessing Your Risks

The American Heart Association divides heart disease risk factors into two categories: those you cannot change and those that can be treated.

Risks you cannot change: increasing age, male gender (men have a greater risk of heart attack, and at a younger age, than women), and heredity (family history is a major risk factor).

Risks that can be modified or treated: smoking, high cholesterol and high blood pressure, physical inactivity, obesity and overweight, diabetes and stress.

Heart-Helping Medications

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

- **Diuretics,** commonly prescribed to flush excess fluid and sodium out of the body
- **Vasodilators** to widen blood vessels
- **ACE inhibitors,** which interfere with the body's production of angiotensin, a chemical that narrows arteries
- **Beta-blockers and calcium channel blockers** to reduce heart rate and relax blood vessels
- **Angiotensin** agonists to block the effects of angiotensin

Note: Many people need more than one drug to help control blood pressure, often a diuretic combined with another medicine, according to the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute.

CHOLESTEROL: A group of medications called "statins" are most frequently prescribed for high cholesterol. Statins appear to lower LDL (low-density lipoprotein, or bad cholesterol).

Remember: 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.

Aspirin Therapy an Option?

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

This information is not intended as a substitute for professional care. Medical Editor: Zorba Paster, M.D.
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