

CARDIOVASCULAR HEALTH

Your Guide to Helping Your Heart



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. It is produced by the liver normally to help combat infection and inflammation. Some researchers say that high CRP levels are a better predictor of heart attack risk than cholesterol levels, but more studies are 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. A protein that helps blood clot normally, 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 Disease: News You Can Use

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 help you pick out the information you can use.



Heart-Helping Medications

Get your cholesterol levels and blood pressure checked regularly. Take any prescribed medication as directed, even if you feel fine.

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.

Note: 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 the most frequently prescribed for high cholesterol. Studies have reported that statins lower LDL (low-density lipoprotein, or "bad" cholesterol) 20–60 percent.

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.

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.

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.
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.
3. **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.
4. **Are you prepared to deal with setbacks?** 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.

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. **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.