

# Risk Factors

## *What Affects Your Chances of Getting Heart Disease?*

You probably know that managing high cholesterol is important to your health—but do you know *why*? Experts say that the level of cholesterol in your blood is closely tied with your chances of getting heart disease. In fact, high cholesterol is one of the major “risk factors” for heart disease.



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## *What Is A Risk Factor?*

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A “risk factor” is a condition that makes you more likely to get a disease. When it comes to high cholesterol, the higher your level, the bigger your risk for developing heart disease—or having a heart attack.

You can’t change some risk factors for heart disease, like age—but there are several risk factors that *can* be changed or treated. By controlling as many of the risk factors as you can, you take positive action to keep your heart healthy.

## *Risk Factors You Can’t Change*

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**Age:** Lowering cholesterol is important for everyone—younger and middle-aged adults, as well as older adults. But as we age, our risk of getting heart and blood vessel (cardiovascular) disease rises. In fact, among the people who die of coronary heart disease, about 85% are aged 65 or older.

**Heredity (including race):** Just like eye or hair color, we can inherit a tendency toward heart disease. Since African Americans have higher blood pressure (another risk factor) than do whites, their risk of heart disease is greater.

**Gender:** Men’s risk of having a heart attack is greater than women’s. While women’s death rate from heart disease rises after menopause, it is still less than men’s.

## *Risk Factors You Can Change or Treat*

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Fortunately, there are several risk factors for heart disease that you *can* do something about by changing lifestyle habits or, if necessary, taking medication.

**Diabetes:** Having this disease seriously raises risk: three fourths of people with diabetes die of some type of heart or blood vessel disease. So, people with diabetes need to do all they can to control their condition, as well as any other risk factors for heart disease.

**High blood pressure:** In combination with other conditions like high cholesterol or obesity, high blood pressure can severely raise the risk of heart attack and stroke. High blood pressure makes the heart work harder and, over time, become weaker.

**High low-density lipoproteins (LDL):** LDL is the “bad” cholesterol. Too much bad LDL cholesterol in the blood can build up and form thick deposits inside arteries. Over the years, as LDL builds up or clogs the arteries, blood flow is reduced. The more LDL cholesterol in your blood, the greater your risk of heart disease.

**Low high-density lipoproteins (HDL):** HDL is the “good” cholesterol. This type of blood cholesterol carries bad LDL cholesterol away. So HDL helps prevent the buildup of deposits in the arteries. If the HDL in your cholesterol is below a certain level, you’re at a much higher risk for heart disease.

**Obesity:** Even without other risk factors, having too much body fat puts you at higher risk for both heart disease and stroke. Carrying around too much weight puts a strain on the heart, affects other risk factors, and increases your chances of getting diabetes. Losing just 10 to 20 pounds can lower your risk.

**Lack of exercise:** It’s true that physical inactivity puts you at risk for heart disease. Also true, even moderate exercise, done regularly, can bring several health benefits. Exercise can not only help control cholesterol, but also help control diabetes, manage weight, and lower blood pressure.



**Smoking:** Just don’t smoke. Smokers have twice the risk of heart attack as nonsmokers. The risk of sudden cardiac death for smokers is up to 4 times higher than for nonsmokers. And regular exposure to secondhand smoke is linked to higher risk of heart disease.

# Remember

The more risk factors you have, the greater your risk of developing disease. You can't change some risk factors. Several risk factors can be changed, by adopting healthier lifestyle habits, or, if necessary, taking medication. To help keep your heart healthy, take control of as many of your risk factors as you can.