

There are a number of things that increase your chance of developing heart disease. Here are the major risk factors that have the most impact on your risk.

Major Risk Factors

1. Family history is very specific, and the most important relatives are the following:

- Father or brother with documented heart disease before the age of 55
- Mother or sister with documented heart disease before the age of 65

In some cases your aunts, uncles, grandparents or cousins are considered, but their health is less important than your parents or siblings.

2. Smoking. Any smoking is bad. The best part is that when you quit the further damage from smoking decreases dramatically. After a few years of not smoking your risk of heart disease from tobacco use returns to almost nothing.

3. High blood pressure. The best part is that this can often be controlled through changes in diet and exercise. For the majority of people, small changes can have a major impact. Research has shown that each 1 kilogram (2.2 pound) loss in weight results in one point reduction in blood pressure.

4. Diabetes. Physicians these days consider diabetes to be equivalent to heart disease. This means that those with diabetes should be treated as if they have heart disease with medication to control blood pressure and cholesterol. As with high blood pressure, diabetes (especially Type II diabetes) is easier to control with diet, exercise and weight loss.

5. Being male (or being female after menopause).

6. Cholesterol is an important factor and reducing total cholesterol and LDL (bad cholesterol) is key. Some of the same measures for controlling diabetes and high blood pressure with change to a healthier diet along with exercise can make a huge difference in your cholesterol results.

Minor Risk Factors

7. Obesity - Body Mass Index (BMI) over 30.0. This is an important risk for heart disease but also for developing high blood pressure and diabetes.

8. Waist to hip ratio (WHR). This calculation is made by dividing the measurement around your waist at the belly button by the measurement around your hips at the widest point.

The WHR is another measurement tool that looks at the amount of fat stored at your waist, hips and buttocks.

When weight is greater around the waist than the hips, we often call this an “apple” shape. Those with more weight in the hips are considered to be “pear” shaped.

Research shows that apple shaped people with more weight located around their middle are at higher risk for heart disease and diabetes than those who are pear shaped and have more weight around their hips, thighs and buttocks.

For women, a result of over 0.8 is considered abnormal. For men, a result of over 0.9 is considered abnormal.

9. Sedentary lifestyle. Exercise of any kind protects you from heart attack. Even as little as 30 minutes, 3 times a week can have a major impact and lower your risk dramatically.

10. High C-Reactive Protein (CRP). CRP is a protein that is produced by the body and is higher when there is inflammation. Such inflammatory states have been linked to heart disease, and studies have shown that the higher CRP levels indicate a higher risk of developing heart attack. Research has shown that your risk for heart attack is doubled if your levels of CRP are in the upper third of CRP levels.

11. Stress. Reducing stress has been shown in research to lower your risk of heart attack.

12. Being of African American or Hispanic descent places you at a higher risk of heart disease. Researchers are not sure exactly why this is, however.