

NEW-LIFESTYLES STEPS TO A HEALTHIER YOUSM CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE FACTS

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We hear almost on a daily basis that heart disease is the leading cause of death in this country and in most of the Western world.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, about 61 million Americans (almost one-fourth of the population) have some form of cardiovascular disease. Many of us have developed a vocabulary of heart-related terminology just from watching the nightly news and/or reading an occasional newspaper. Most of these terms appear to be interchangeable—cardiovascular disease, coronary heart disease, heart disease. Or are they? Before we realize it, we are confused in our own effort to keep current on the latest in medical science and health-related topics.

Since heart disease is, after all, responsible for how many of us "meet our bitter end," it seems logical that we would want to know and understand a few of the basics. First things first—it's time to straighten out our heart-related vocabulary once and for all.

What is cardiovascular disease?

Cardiovascular disease is a broad, all-encompassing term for the diseases and conditions related to the heart and blood vessels—both of which make up the body's circulatory system. Breaking the word into two parts: *cardio* refers to diseases of the heart and *vascular* refers to diseases of the blood vessels. For simplicity's sake, "heart disease" is often used to discuss cardiovascular disease in the broadest of terms.

Some of the heart conditions and diseases that fall under the broad term of cardiovascular

disease are: coronary heart disease, stroke, aneurysm, heart attack, congestive heart failure, hypertension and peripheral vascular disease, to name a few.

Some types of cardiovascular disease involve inherited conditions and physical abnormalities acquired at birth that affect a person's heart. Other types of cardiovascular disease are preventable, as they are often a result of unhealthy lifestyle choices like smoking, eating a high-fat, high-cholesterol diet and not being physically active. Maybe this is why there is so much discussion surrounding cardiovascular disease—because we can do many things to reduce our risk of developing these heart conditions later in life by making healthy changes today.

To easily understand cardiovascular disease, picture the heart and blood vessels as a complex traffic highway system. The heart is a muscle central to the system, acting as a traffic signal to direct and pump oxygen-rich blood through the blood vessels to all of the parts of the body. As with any complex system, problems can occur at any point—the traffic signal could stop working. The blood vessels or "highways" could become clogged and congested. Many conditions and diseases arise as a result of these problems within the cardiovascular system.

What is coronary heart disease (CHD)?

One of the main cardiovascular diseases is coronary heart disease (CHD) which can lead to a heart attack. Coronary heart disease (CHD) is caused by a steady buildup of plaque in the coronary arteries which cause reduced blood flow to the heart, denying the heart tissue of necessary oxygen. Too much cholesterol in the blood can cause the arteries to narrow as the cholesterol builds up as plaque on the arterial walls. A lack of oxygen-rich blood causes the heart tissue to die, causing a "heart attack." Surviving a heart attack largely depends upon the amount of heart tissue destroyed.



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What are the risk factors for CHD?

Risk factors for coronary heart disease are the same as those for other cardiovascular diseases—cigarette smoking, overweight and obesity, elevated cholesterol (and specifically low levels of HDL regardless of total cholesterol is an important risk factor for CHD) and blood pressure levels and lack of exercise. Other risk factors include family history of the disease, sex, age, emotional stress and uncontrolled high blood sugar.

What is stroke?

Stroke affects blood vessels that supply blood to the brain. A stroke occurs when a blood vessel carrying oxygen and nutrients to the brain is either blocked by a blood clot or some other particle or bursts. Without oxygen, nerve cells in the affected part of the brain die. The death of these brain nerve cells causes the parts of the body that they control to not work either. The effects of stroke are often permanent, as dead nerve cells in the brain are not replaced.

How can we reduce our risk of cardiovascular disease?

The best approach is to prevent cardiovascular disease before it becomes a life-threatening condition. Many of the cardiovascular diseases, like CHD, can be prevented and, to a certain extent, reversed with changes in lifestyle to stop smoking and support healthy diet and exercise habits.

Health professionals often sound like a broken record when encouraging individuals to make lifestyle changes. They do so because these key healthy habits can dramatically decrease a person's risk of developing heart disease as well as avoid many other detrimental health conditions.

Good heart health does not require leading a life of self-deprivation. Rather, it involves deploying a few simple strategies that are relatively painless, habit-forming and worth every effort: Be physically active. Stop smoking. Visit the doctor for regular checkups to monitor blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Maintain a healthy weight. Eat a diet rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains and low in saturated fats and cholesterol. This is all it takes to keep hearts healthier for years to come.

What are the warning signs for a heart attack?

It goes without saying that it is extremely important to be able to recognize the warning signs of a heart attack or stroke—and to then call 9-1-1 for emergency medical attention. It isn't always easy to tell if a heart attack is happening. Most heart attacks start slowly, with mild discomfort that is often hard to discern from other less serious aches and pains. Even if someone isn't sure what's wrong, don't wait more than 5 minutes to take action and seek help.

Here are signs and symptoms of a heart attack:

Chest discomfort. A classic heart attack symptom is discomfort, pressure, a feeling of fullness or squeezing pain in the center of the chest that lasts for more than a few minutes. It is also common for the chest discomfort to go away and then come back.

Other discomfort. Pain and discomfort can also occur elsewhere in areas of the upper body, such as the jaw and teeth, one or both arms, neck, or even the upper abdomen.

Shortness of breath. Difficulty breathing can begin before chest pain does, or at the same time. Shortness of breath may occur with or without chest discomfort.

Nausea, sweating and lightheadedness. These vague symptoms are sometimes the only indications of a heart attack. Heartburn, or indigestion, can also signal a heart attack.

Women often do not experience the classic chest pain symptoms of heart attack. Instead, they can show atypical signs, such as nausea, sweating, vomiting, breathlessness or lightheadedness. Women have even been known to have heart attack symptoms, like trouble sleeping and extreme fatigue, weeks before the heart attack.

Even if the person has had a heart attack before, signs and symptoms can vary dramatically with each heart attack. It's best not to make assumptions based on previous experience—but to get to a hospital right away.

In the case of a heart attack, it's often best to prepare for the worst case scenario. Having aspirin and nitroglycerin on hand and knowing when and how to give them (and also how to administer CPR) can be vital during a heart attack. These are things that should be discussed thoroughly with a doctor for proper instruction.



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