

Controlling Your Risk Factors for a Healthier Heart

"I noticed my heart beating under exertion. Something wasn't right, so I went in to the doctor.... I flunked my heart catheterization. They showed me that I had major blockages in the coronary arteries in my heart. I needed bypass surgery." – Kirk, Patient

When you have had heart surgery, a heart attack, stroke or even an angioplasty you have cardiovascular disease. This means you have an increased risk of having another heart attack, stroke, or developing peripheral artery disease, commonly called PAD.

"I've had numerous heart attacks, and I just got done having prosthetic arteries put in my leg for a peripheral artery disease." – Charlie, Patient

Everything in your body, including your heart, lungs and brain, is connected together by a vascular system, or blood system. Over time, fatty substances can cause plaque to build-up on the blood vessel walls anywhere in your vascular system.

This is called atherosclerosis and can slow the blood flow throughout the body. When plaque blocks or builds up in the blood vessels that lead to the brain or heart, you can have a heart attack or stroke.

And when you have heart disease you are more likely to develop atherosclerosis somewhere else in your blood system. The only way to lessen this increased risk is to know and control your cardiovascular risk factors, the things that lead to plaque build-up.

Some risk factors you have no control over, like your age. As you grow older, your risk of heart disease and stroke increases. Family history is another risk factor you have no control over. No matter what your age, having a close blood relative with heart disease increases your risk, especially if the relative is a man under 55 or a woman under 65.

"My mother's side, high blood pressure, stroke. And on my father's side, high blood pressure, stroke, some heart disease. So, I have the gene." – Judy, Patient

Your ethnicity plays a part in your risk level as well. Studies show that African Americans have a high risk for heart disease. Heart disease is also a major cause of death for Hispanic, South Asian and Native Americans.

Even though you can't control your age, family history, or ethnicity, you should know that there are many risk factors you can work to manage, reduce or even eliminate. Controllable risk factors include:

Smoking
Diabetes

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High cholesterol
High blood pressure
Obesity
Physical inactivity and
Stress.

These are the factors that will speed up your cardiovascular disease process and increase your risk of heart attack, stroke, and PAD. Knowing your risk factors and how to manage them can help you take the steps you need to reduce this risk. Each of these risk factors can be improved by making healthy lifestyle changes.

Lifestyle changes include making healthy food choices, exercising, quitting smoking, getting flu and pneumonia vaccinations, and managing your stress.

Most people with heart disease take several medications each day to help control their risk factors. Make sure you take them exactly as prescribed and learn all you can about how to take yours safely.

Meet with your cardiac care team to talk about your risk factors and create a plan to reduce your risk of heart disease. They will help you set goals that can lead to a heart healthy lifestyle and reduce your risk of further heart and blood vessel damage.

Keeping your cardiovascular system as healthy as possible should be your number one priority. Make healthy lifestyle changes to manage your risk factors today.