

Women and Heart Disease: Cholesterol and Blood Pressure

Heart disease usually develops over the course of a lifetime, but it doesn't have to happen.

You're more likely to develop heart disease, or suffer a heart attack, if you have certain risk factors like unhealthy cholesterol levels and high blood pressure.

These risk factors are mostly controlled by making choices to be healthier.

Cholesterol is a fatty substance found in the blood stream anywhere in your body.

Some cholesterol is good and can actually help your body. But some types of cholesterol are bad and can increase your risk of heart disease.

The bad types of cholesterol, known as LDL cholesterol, can form plaque within the layers of the artery walls and cause damage. Over time, the increased cholesterol levels from unhealthy food choices, lack of exercise, and your family history, can cause your arteries to become blocked. Menopause can also increase cholesterol.

Work with your healthcare provider to reach a healthy cholesterol level. Your healthcare provider may recommend you make lifestyle changes like making healthy food choices and getting regular exercise to reduce your bad cholesterol and increase your good cholesterol.

Or she may recommend you take a medication called a statin which helps lower your cholesterol.

Together, you and your healthcare provider can decide on the best way to reach a healthy cholesterol level and in turn lower your risk of heart disease.

When you have high blood pressure, also known as hypertension, the increased pressure of the blood flow can damage your vessel walls.

High blood pressure is also the number one risk factor for stroke.

For most people, if your systolic blood pressure is 130 or higher, or your diastolic is 80 or higher, and stays high over time, then you have high blood pressure.

If you have Diabetes, your blood pressure readings should run in a lower range, which may require medication.

Have your blood pressure checked at each healthcare visit. If you are at high risk, ask your healthcare provider if you should use a home blood pressure monitor.

When you are trying to manage both your cholesterol and blood pressure levels, there are some lifestyle changes you can make that will lead to better overall heart health. Start by making heart healthy food choices.

To manage your cholesterol, choose fats wisely.

Fats that are heart healthy are called monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats which include Omega 3 fatty acids. Healthy fats can be found in nuts, seeds, unprocessed/ uncommercial canola oil, olive oil and fish. Choose "oily" fish, like salmon, at least twice a week.

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At the same time, reduce the amount of unhealthy fats you eat. Saturated fats, and trans fats, can increase your risk of heart disease.

Trans fats are in commercially baked deserts, fast food and even in some peanut butters.

Women should reduce their saturated fat intake to less than 6 percent of their calories if possible. And aim for 0 trans fats.

Also, limit the amount of sodium you eat to reduce your blood pressure and further reduce your risk of heart disease. Sodium is found in most processed and convenience foods. And try to avoid adding extra salt at the table.

Because sodium is used in many packaged or prepared foods, try to choose fresh vegetables and fruit when possible.

To further lower your cholesterol and blood pressure, add physical activity to your daily routine.

The American Heart Association recommends that you get 150 minutes or more of moderate to vigorous aerobic activity, above your normal household chores, per week to protect your heart.

If choosing healthy foods and getting regular physical activity does not improve your cholesterol or blood pressure, your doctor may prescribe medication. Take it as directed; and be patient, it may take a while before you start seeing results.

Although it may take time, the steps you take to lower your cholesterol and blood pressure will reduce your risk for heart disease and increase your overall health for the better.