

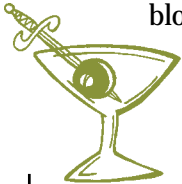
as well from heart attacks. Although it is not clear if lack of exercise alone is a risk factor for developing heart disease, in combination with other risk factors, such as overweight, the risk is higher.

Stress. Excessive emotional stress over a prolonged period appears to increase the risk of heart disease. Stress can increase other existing risk factors, such as overeating, smoking, and high blood pressure.

Oral contraceptives. Birth control pills can worsen other risk factors. They raise blood cholesterol levels and increase blood pressure, so women who already have these problems should not take oral contraceptives. Smokers who take “the pill” run the risk of developing dangerous blood clots (thrombosis).

Alcohol. Heavy drinking can cause high blood pressure and lead to heart failure.

Alcohol should be consumed only in moderate amounts — two ounces of liquor a day or less.



Cardiovascular Disease Risk Factors



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Many deaths from cardiovascular disease are preventable. In addition, for people who already have been diagnosed with cardiovascular disease, the risk of death and further complications can be reduced. Research has uncovered several factors that contribute to heart attacks and strokes. The more risk factors a person has, the greater the chance of developing cardiovascular disease. Although some risk factors cannot be changed, you can modify others with your doctor's help, and still others can be eliminated altogether. The following checklists can help you determine your risk.



Major Risk Factors That Cannot Be Changed

Heredity. A tendency toward heart disease runs in families. If one or both parents had cardiovascular disease, one's chances of developing it are higher.

Race. For reasons presently unknown, blacks have a much greater risk of developing high blood pressure than whites; twice as many have moderately high blood pressure, and three times as many have extremely high blood pressure. As a result, their risk of heart disease is greater.

Sex. Men have a higher risk of heart attack and stroke than women. During the childbearing

years, women produce hormones that keep blood cholesterol levels low. Male hormones have the opposite effect—they raise blood cholesterol.

However, women lose this protection after menopause or surgical removal of the ovaries, and women over age 55 have a 10 times greater risk than younger women. In recent years, however, more women under age 40 have developed coronary artery disease and high blood pressure. This probably results from the use of oral contraceptives and increased smoking.

Age. Fifty-five percent of heart attacks occur in people age 65 or older.

Major Risk Factors That Can Be Changed

Smoking. Smokers have more than twice as many heart attacks as nonsmokers. Sudden cardiac death occurs two to four times more frequently in smokers. Peripheral vascular disease (narrowing of the blood vessels in the arms and legs) is almost exclusively a disease of smokers. When people stop smoking, the risk of heart disease is about the same as for people who never smoked.

High Blood Pressure. High blood pressure makes the heart work harder, causing it to enlarge and become weaker over time. This can lead to stroke, heart attack, kidney failure, and con-

gestive heart failure. For some people, high blood pressure can be controlled by a low-salt diet, weight reduction, and regular exercise. Other people also require medication to lower their blood pressure.

Blood Cholesterol Levels. A cholesterol level between 200 and 240 mg/dl increases the risk of heart disease. A cholesterol level greater than 240 mg/dl doubles the risk of coronary artery disease. The American Heart Association Diet, which is low in cholesterol and other fats, is recommended for anyone with a level of 200 or higher. Medication may also be necessary.



Other Risk Factors

Diabetes. Diabetes increases the risk of heart attack because it raises blood cholesterol levels. In addition, people who develop diabetes in mid-life are often overweight, which is an additional risk factor.

Obesity. Excess weight forces the heart to work harder. People who are overweight are more prone to high blood pressure and high blood cholesterol levels. Obesity is defined as 30 percent or more over your ideal weight.



Physical inactivity. Researchers have found that people who seldom exercise do not recover