

Risk Reduction for Heart and Vascular Disease

Risk factors are habits, traits or conditions that may increase a person's chance of developing atherosclerosis. With atherosclerosis, fat, cholesterol and calcium build up inside the arteries. This buildup is called plaque and is a major cause of stroke, heart and vascular disease. It cannot be cured.

Take steps to lower your risk of heart and vascular disease.

However, you can take steps to halt its progress. The key is to know your risk factors and modify the ones you can. This can both lengthen and improve the quality of your life. Talk with your healthcare providers to find ways to lower your risk. Some risk factors cannot be changed. These include:

Age

The risk of heart disease increases with age:

- Men who are 45 or older
- Women who are 55 or older

Gender

- Men are at higher risk than women.
- Women are at greater risk after menopause. Early menopause may increase this risk even more.

Family history

History of a heart attack in a parent or sibling puts you at greater risk of having heart disease, especially if it occurs before the age of:

- 55 in a father or brother
- 65 in a mother or sister

Therefore, it is especially important to control the risk factors that you can. This brochure will explain these and help you get started in controlling them.

Cholesterol, fat and diet

What you eat can affect your fat and cholesterol blood levels, which are important risk factors. There are 2 types of cholesterol in the blood that are important: LDL and HDL.

- **LDL or Low-density Lipoprotein** is known as the “bad” cholesterol. **High LDL blood levels increase the risk of heart attack and stroke.** A low LDL level is considered good for your health. A diet low in saturated fat and trans fat can help.

- **HDL** or **High-density Lipoprotein** is known as the “good” cholesterol. HDLs help rid the body of unwanted cholesterol. **High HDL blood levels may lower your risk of heart attack.** A low level may actually increase your risk of heart disease or stroke.
- **Triglycerides** are a type of fat in your body. High blood levels increase your risk of heart attack or stroke. Sugar, alcohol, excess weight and saturated fat in foods may increase triglyceride blood levels.

Cholesterol is found in foods from animals. Some of these may be high in saturated fat. Ask your physician if you need to limit your intake of foods that contain cholesterol. Take medicine to lower your cholesterol levels, if prescribed by your physician.

To keep your LDL, HDL and triglyceride levels within the desired range, many physicians recommend a “Mediterranean Diet.” Consider embracing these guidelines:

- Limit or avoid foods and beverages high in sugar.
- Don’t add salt to foods. Use other herbs and spices instead.

Fats

- Eat foods low in saturated and trans fat. This helps keep LDL levels low. No more than 5 to 6 percent of your total daily calories should come from saturated fat.
- Use foods that contain unsaturated fats, such as avocados, walnuts, almonds.
- Use olive, peanut, sesame or canola oil instead of butter or margarine as a spread, dip or for cooking. Tahini is a good choice for dips or spreads.
- Nuts and seeds are sources of healthy fats as well as good sources of fiber and protein.

Breads

- Whole grain breads and cereals are a healthy food choice.
- Also, whole grain rice and pasta are healthier than white.

Meat and fish

- Limit red meat to a few times a month. Choose lean cuts of beef and keep portions small—about the size of a deck of cards.
- Broil, roast, grill or bake lean meats such as poultry and fish (instead of frying).
- Eat fish at least twice a week. Good choices include salmon, trout, mackerel, herring and tuna packed in water.
- Avoid sausage, bacon, hot dogs and other high-fat processed meats.

Dairy

- Limit whole or 2 percent milk, cheese and ice cream. These tend to be high in saturated fat. Choose skim milk, fat-free yogurt and low-fat cheese instead.

Fruits and vegetables

- Include fresh fruits and vegetables at every meal. Use as snacks as well.

The Northwestern Medicine (NM) brochure *Heart Healthy Nutrition* offers more information on choosing heart-healthy foods, cooking and dining out, reading food labels and tips to add fiber to your diet. A dietitian can also suggest ways for you to improve your diet.

Tobacco

Tobacco use of any kind is the single most important risk factor that leads to heart and vascular disease. Tobacco use:

- Damages arteries
- Reduces HDL levels
- Limits blood supply to the arms and legs
- Increases risk for blood clots
- Increases heart rate and blood pressure
- Increases plaque (fat, cholesterol) buildup in the arteries

These same effects can also occur if exposed to high amounts of “secondhand” or environmental smoke. If you need help to quit, talk with your physician or nurse. The NM brochure *Tobacco-Free Future* offers tips to get started.

High blood pressure

High blood pressure raises your risk for heart disease, stroke and kidney disease. Since it often goes undetected, have regular check-ups with your physician. Know your target blood pressure. For many, the goal is around 120/80. Many factors can lead to high blood pressure.

Follow your physician’s advice should you need to:

- Lose weight. Blood pressure will often drop when excess weight is shed.
- Reduce salt (sodium) intake. Salt may lead to fluid retention, which can lead to high blood pressure. For many, daily salt intake should be between 1500 to 2300 mg per day. Choose and prepare foods without adding salt. Check food labels and limit the use of processed or canned foods.
- Start a regular exercise program. This is a good way to lose excess weight, strengthen the heart, reduce stress and lower blood pressure.
- Take prescribed medicine.
- Quit smoking or using any type of tobacco.
- Reduce stress. Meditation or relaxation exercises may help lower stress and help control your blood pressure.

Diabetes

Heart and vascular disease often occur earlier and progress faster in those with diabetes. If you have diabetes, it is very important to keep your blood sugar under control. Regular exercise, diet and prescribed medicines can help you control your diabetes.

Exercise

Regular aerobic exercise such as walking, swimming, dancing, bicycling or running on most days of the week makes your heart and body stronger. It also helps reduce other risk factors, such as:

- High blood pressure
- Excess weight
- Diabetes
- High LDL levels
- Stress

Lack of regular exercise increases your risk for heart and vascular disease. If you do not exercise, talk with your healthcare provider to help you find other ways to lower your risk factors.

If you have heart disease, ask your physician about a cardiac rehabilitation program. This can help you become heart-healthy through safe exercise. The NM brochure *Exercise and Your Heart* also offers guidelines to get you started.

Excess weight

A body mass index (BMI) of more than 25 is considered overweight; a BMI over 30 is considered obese. Waist size of more than 40 inches in men and more than 35 inches in women is also a risk factor.

Excess weight can lead to:

- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Higher triglyceride levels
- Lower HDL levels

Body mass index (BMI) calculator

BMI measures body fat based on height and weight. The measurement applies to both men and women. A higher BMI may mean a higher risk for diseases related to obesity. (A BMI calculator can be found on the American Heart Association's website, www.americanheart.org.)

Diet and exercise are key to **losing excess weight. Start by talking with your physician or dietitian about what a healthy weight is for you. Set goals to reach that weight.** Ask how many calories you should be taking in per day. You would need to lower your total calorie intake by 500 calories per day if your goal is to lose 1 pound per week.

Weight management help is available through Northwestern Medicine's:

- Center for Lifestyle Medicine 312.695.2300
- Raby Institute for Integrative Medicine 312.276.1212

The NM brochures: *Managing Your Weight – Tracking Your Activity* as well as *Managing Your Weight – Portion Control* are useful resources to help guide you.

Stress

High levels of stress can increase your risk for heart and vascular disease. Stress can lead to overeating and increased heart rate and blood pressure. Know the sources of stress in your life. To reduce your stress level:

- Know your limits
- Find social release, get involved in hobbies
- Exercise
- Balance work with play
- Delegate the things you can
- Seek counseling to help you deal with stress

You may wish to contact the Cardiac Behavioral Medicine 312.664.3278 for help.

Warning signs of heart attack and stroke

Reducing your risk also means knowing the warning signs of Heart Attack and Stroke.

Heart Attack	Stroke, Mini-stroke, TIA (transient ischemic attack)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Uncomfortable pressure, fullness, squeezing or pain in the center of the chest lasting more than a few minutes.▪ Pain spreading to the shoulders, neck or arms.▪ Chest discomfort with lightheadedness, fainting, sweating, nausea or vomiting.▪ Shortness of breath with or without chest discomfort.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Unexplained dizziness, unsteadiness or sudden falls.▪ Facial drooping.▪ Arm or leg weakness or numbness.▪ Difficulty speaking or understanding speech.

If you notice any one of these signs, call 911 to get medical help right away.

Heart attack and stroke are medical emergencies!

Para asistencia en español, por favor llamar al Departamento de Representantes para Pacientes al 312.926.3112.

The entities that come together as Northwestern Medicine are committed to representing the communities we serve, fostering a culture of inclusion, delivering culturally competent care, providing access to treatment and programs in a nondiscriminatory manner and eliminating healthcare disparities. For questions, please call either Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Patient Representatives Department at 312.926.3112, TDD/TTY 312.926.6363, the Northwestern Lake Forest Patient Relations manager at 847.535.8282 and/or the Northwestern Medical Group Patient Representatives Department at 312.695.1100, TDD/TTY 312.926.6363.

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