

# Heart Disease & You

Though heart disease is widely known as the number one killer of women, it is actually a genderless complication that poses serious health safety risks to men, women, and children.

Also known as cardiovascular disease, the affliction focuses primarily on the cardiovascular system, which includes the heart and blood vessels (arteries, capillaries and veins). Cardiovascular disease is primarily perceived as simply heart disease, though it also encompasses vascular diseases of the brain and kidney, and other areas.

Though it typically affects older adults (sometimes referred to as being in the category of ‘seniors’), some of the predecessors to heart disease — particularly [atherosclerosis](#) — can reveal themselves early in life. This means prevention can and should begin as early as childhood.

## Risk Factors Overview

Some of the risk factors for heart disease are difficult or even impossible to control. These include:

- age
- gender
- family history
- air pollution

There are, however, other risk factors that each person is able to manage, based on their choices and considerations. These include:

- smoking
- alcohol and drug use
- obesity
- lack of physical activity (exercise)

Additional risks of heart disease can be complications caused by other activities, and these include:

- high blood pressure
- high cholesterol
- diabetes
- psychological complications

## Risk Factors Examined

### Age

*Age* is a contributing factor in most cases of heart disease. Some doctors cite research that suggests nearly 90% of the people who die of heart disease are 60 and older. The risk of stroke doubles every decade past 55 years of age.

The risk of **high cholesterol** also increases as people age. Additionally, the structure and integrity of the vascular wall changes with age, reducing elasticity (‘stretchiness’), which can lead to heart disease.

### Gender

Adult males have a greater risk of heart disease than pre-menopausal women. However, post-menopause, women’s risks are nearly comparable to men’s. Statistical data shows that heart disease is currently the [number one killer of women](#).

Doctors have been investigating the reasons for this, and some suggest it may be caused in part by hormonal differences between the genders. Estrogen is the dominant hormone in women, and some doctors believe that estrogen may improve cell function, which would ultimately reduce the risk for heart disease.

However, women who have experience menopause — either naturally or through a hysterectomy — are twice as likely to develop heart disease than their female peers who have not had an operation or gone through menopause.

## Symptoms of a Heart Attack

When the heart is not able to function at its full capacity, the risk of heart attack is greatly increased. Some symptoms of an impending heart attack include:

- chest pain
- pain or discomfort in the arms, back, neck, jaw, and stomach
- shortness of breath

## Preventative Measures

As earlier mentioned, there are hereditary issues attached to heart disease that cannot be altered or avoided. In some cases, even environmental factors (such as air pollution) may pose a problem in correcting, since it would mean moving away from your home and job. Fortunately, there are several methods by which you can put yourself in a lower risk category for heart disease, and many of them you can begin working on today!

### Tobacco Cessation

Tobacco use poses the foremost risk for heart disease. This is because chemicals in tobacco (including tar and other chemicals) can damage the heart and blood vessels, which can narrow the arteries. Even cigars and pipe tobacco contain these chemicals, as does snuff, or the so-called “smokeless” tobacco. No amount of tobacco use (even “in moderation”) is safe from the heart disease risk it can create. Second-hand smoke can also pose a health risk.

The nicotine in tobacco (including cigars and pipe tobacco) has the ability to speed your heart rate and raise blood pressure. This is a sometimes sought after feature (sometimes referred to as a “buzz”). Cigarette smoke in particular contains carbon monoxide that can replace some of the oxygen in your blood. This, too, raises blood pressure.

Quitting all forms of tobacco use can drastically improve your overall health in as little as one year and significantly reduce your risk for heart disease.

### Physical Activity (Exercise)

People who exercise for at least 30 minutes a day, four or five days a week are at a much lower risk for heart disease than those who lead a sedentary lifestyle. Regular exercise is also effective in maintaining a healthy weight.

Health professionals recommend 30 to 60 minutes of moderate physical activity at least three times a week. They say this exercise can also reduce stress levels, which is a contributor to heart attacks and other complications.

### Diet

For those who wish to reduce their risk of heart disease, it is important to adopt a diet that is low in fat, cholesterol, and salt. This is not to suggest that you will be able to — or should — cut these elements entirely out of your diet. Instead, it is wise to switch to a diet that is rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products. Beans, low-fat sources of protein, and some types of fish (such as salmon and mackerel) can also reduce the risk of heart disease. The [USDA Food Pyramid](#) is a helpful and effective guide in this regard.

## Weight

Coupled with diet, achieving and maintaining a healthy weight is an essential aspect of reducing the risk of heart disease. Fighting obesity can also help alleviate other health complications such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes.

## Regular Health Screenings

It is also important to ensure your health screenings (sometimes referred to as “check-ups”) are up-to-date and current. This where your doctor can determine your risk levels for heart disease and other potential complications that you may have been previously unaware of. Your doctor will screen you for many health factors, and give you an idea of your “numbers,” including:

- blood pressure
- cholesterol
- diabetes risk
- and more

## What Next?

If it has been some time since you have visited your doctor, now is a good time to schedule an appointment to ensure you are in good health and not in a risk category for heart disease. ■