

## **Risk Factors for Heart Disease**

A risk factor is something that increases your chances of getting a disease. Heart disease involves damage to arteries, blood vessels that carry oxygen-rich blood through your body. Things like smoking or high cholesterol levels can damage arteries. You can't control some risk factors. But most, like a high-fat diet or lack of exercise, are things you can control.

### **High Blood Cholesterol**

Cholesterol is a fatty substance in your blood. It can build up inside your arteries and block the blood flow to your heart or brain..

### **High Blood Pressure**

With high blood pressure, your heart works extra hard to pump blood through your arteries. Over time, the artery walls can be damaged. High blood pressure can damage the heart, brain, eyes, and other organs.

### **Stress**

Stressful events and feelings can raise the levels of stress hormones in your blood. These hormones, in turn, raise your heart rate and blood pressure. You can't remove all stress from your life, but you can learn ways to cope with stress.

### **High-Fat Diets**

Some processed foods, fatty meats, and dairy products, like butter and cheese, are high in fat and calories. If you eat more processed, packaged foods than grains, fruits and vegetables, your cholesterol may be too high. This puts you at risk for heart disease.

### **Diabetes**

Diabetes is a disease that makes it hard for your body to use sugar. Extra sugar in your blood may damage your arteries. Untreated diabetes increases your risk for a heart attack or stroke.

### **Excess Weight and Lack of Exercise**

Your heart is a muscle. It needs regular exercise to stay strong. Being overweight puts a strain on your heart and makes it hard for you to be more active. Staying active reduces the chance of future heart disease and stroke. It also can help you manage stress or lose weight.

### **Smoking**

Smoking damages your arteries. It reduces blood flow to your heart and brain. It greatly increases your risk for heart disease, stroke, lung disease, and cancer. If you keep smoking after a heart attack, you can double your risk of a second heart attack.

### **Other Risk Factors**

Heart disease can run in families. Also, some people are more prone to be overweight or to have high blood pressure or high cholesterol. Age is another factor. Men over 45 and women over 55 are at higher risk for heart disease.

Most people with heart disease have more than one risk factor.