



# Heart Disease: Know the Risks

## What is heart disease?

Coronary heart disease occurs when the arteries become narrowed and hardened due to a buildup of plaque. Over time heart disease can lead to heart failure, where the heart muscle is so weak that it cannot pump enough blood. When the blood supply to the heart is severely reduced or completely cut off, a heart attack occurs.

## Are you at risk?

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States. Some people are more likely to develop heart disease than others. Some factors cannot be controlled, such as family history or advancing age. However, since most risk factors *can* be controlled, it's important to know what you can do to *take one step* for better health.

### High blood pressure

Blood pressure is the force of your blood against the arteries when your heart beats and then rests. If you have high blood pressure, you are at risk for developing heart disease.

### High cholesterol

Cholesterol is a type of fat that your body needs, but if there is too much, it can build up and narrow the arteries. There is “bad” cholesterol (LDL) and “good” cholesterol (HDL). Your total cholesterol should be less than 200.

### Diabetes

Increased blood sugar caused by diabetes can damage blood vessels and nerves, putting you at greater risk for heart disease. You can have diabetes without knowing it, so get your blood sugar checked regularly.

### Smoking

Smoking cigarettes not only causes lung cancer, it also promotes clogged arteries, raises blood pressure, and reduces oxygen in the blood. Smoking is more than a bad habit—it's downright deadly.



### **Overweight or obese**

Extra body weight means that there is more fat in the blood and around the organs. This can lead to heart disease, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and diabetes. Losing weight reduces your risk.

### **Unhealthy food choices**

Eating foods high in saturated fats and cholesterol can lead to clogged arteries. Foods that are high in salt can increase high blood pressure. Packaged, prepared, and fast foods tend to have high levels of salt, cholesterol, saturated and trans fats.

### **Lack of exercise**

Too little physical activity can lead to obesity, high blood pressure, low levels of HDL (good) cholesterol, and diabetes. Exercise helps you maintain a healthy weight, reduce stress, and improve your overall health.

## **Special Risks**

Heart disease affects everyone, but certain groups are at greater risk than others.

- More women die of heart disease than of breast cancer and ovarian cancer combined.
- The lifetime risk of developing high blood pressure for women aged 55 is about 90 percent.
- African American women ages 55–64 are twice as likely as white women to have a heart attack and 35 percent more likely to suffer from coronary artery disease.
- African Americans are more likely to have high blood pressure, develop it earlier in life, and have more severe cases.
- Due in part to higher rates of diabetes and obesity, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and native Hawaiians are at high risk for heart disease.
- One in five American children is obese and one in three is considered to be overweight, putting them at a higher risk for diabetes and high blood pressure than ever before.

## **For More Information**

Log on to [www.pbs.org/takeonestep/heart](http://www.pbs.org/takeonestep/heart) for advice, tips, and resources about heart disease.