



February is Heart Month

Bless Your Heart!

Do You Have High Blood Pressure?

High blood pressure is the single most significant risk factor for heart disease. It's sometimes called "the silent killer" because it has no symptoms.

What is High Blood Pressure?

High blood pressure, also known as **hypertension**, is an often misunderstood medical condition.

The blood running through your arteries flows with too much force and puts pressure on your arteries, stretching them past their healthy limit and causing microscopic tears. Our body then kicks into injury-healing mode to repair these tears with scar tissue. But unfortunately, the scar tissue traps plaque and white blood cells which can form into blockages, blood clots, and hardened, weakened arteries.

Blockages and blood clots mean less blood can get to our vital organs, and without blood, the tissue dies. That's why high blood pressure can lead to stroke, heart attack, kidney failure, and even heart failure.

By keeping your blood pressure in the healthy range, you are reducing the risk of your blood vessels becoming overstretched and injured, reducing the risk of your heart having to pump harder to compensate for blockages, and protecting your entire body so that it receives blood that is rich in oxygen.

American Heart Association Guidelines:

While there is no cure, high blood pressure is manageable. Your goal for normal blood pressure is less than 120 mm Hg systolic AND less than 80 mm Hg diastolic. Lifestyle changes provide a prescription for healthy living. These changes may reduce your blood pressure without the use of prescription medications: eating a heart-healthy diet, which may include reducing salt; enjoying regular physical activity; maintaining a healthy weight; managing stress; limiting alcohol; avoiding tobacco smoke.



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Get Active



Finding time in our overscheduled lives for exercise is a challenge for all busy Americans. But the benefits far outweigh the sacrifices it takes to carve out that time. And anyone who has successfully managed to do so will tell you how happy they are to have found the time. They'll tell you how much more energy they have, and how they are actually able to do more than before they started getting regular exercise. So no more excuses! Take an active role in determining your future. You deserve to give yourself the gift of living well with good health.

Why is Getting Active So Important?

The facts are clear: By exercising for as little as 30 minutes each day you can reduce your risk of heart disease. Without regular physical activity, the body slowly loses its strength and ability to function well. Physical activity means living a longer, healthier life.

Regular Physical Activity Helps:

Lower blood pressure, increase HDL "good" cholesterol in your blood, control blood sugar, reduce feelings of stress, and control body weight. Feeling fit helps you feel good about yourself!

American Heart Association Guidelines

We suggest at least 150 minutes per week of moderate exercise or 75 minutes per week of vigorous exercise. Physical activity is anything that makes you move your body and burns calories. Aerobic exercises such as walking, jogging, swimming or biking benefit your heart. Strength and stretching exercises are best for overall stamina and flexibility.

The simplest, positive change you can make to effectively improve your heart health is to start walking. It's enjoyable, free, easy, social and great exercise. Check out the American Heart Association's **Start!** walking program at [heart.org/Start](https://www.heart.org/Start) to get going with expert advice.

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Eat Better

A healthy diet and lifestyle are your best weapons to fight cardiovascular disease. However, there are a lot of mixed messages and myths out there regarding healthy eating. With all the differing opinions, it's best to get informed from credible sources, so you can make smart choices in your diet for long-term benefits to your heart and health. It's the overall pattern of your choices that counts most.

What's Most Important?

You may be eating plenty of food, but your body may not be getting the nutrients it needs to be healthy. Nutrient-rich foods have vitamins, minerals, fiber and other nutrients, but are lower in calories. To get the nutrients you need, choose foods like vegetables, fruits, whole-grain products and fat-free or low-fat dairy products most often.

Recommended Food Choice Guidelines

Vegetables and fruits are high in vitamins, minerals and fiber — and they're low in calories. Eating a variety of fruits and vegetables may help you control your weight and your blood pressure.

Unrefined whole-grain foods contain fiber that can help lower your blood cholesterol and help you feel full, which may help you manage your weight.

Eat fish at least twice a week. Recent research shows that eating oily fish containing omega-3 fatty acids (salmon, trout, and herring) may help lower your risk of death from coronary artery disease. Choose lean meats and poultry without skin and prepare them without added saturated and trans fat. Select fat-free, 1 percent fat and low-fat dairy products.

Cut back on foods containing partially hydrogenated vegetable oils to reduce trans fat in your diet. Aim to eat less than 300 milligrams of cholesterol each day. Choose and prepare foods with little or no salt. Aim to eat less than 1500 milligrams of sodium per day.



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Lose Weight

Among Americans age 20 and older, 145 million are overweight or obese (BMI of 25.0 kg/m² and higher). That's 76.9 million men and 68.1 million women. This is of great concern especially since obesity is now recognized as a major, independent risk factor for heart disease. If you have too much fat — especially if a lot of it is at your waist — you're at higher risk for such health problems as high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol and diabetes.

If you're overweight or obese, you can reduce your risk for heart disease by successfully losing weight and keeping it off. When coming up with a fitness and nutrition plan to lose weight, it's important to understand your recommended calorie intake and then the amount of food calories you're consuming, versus the energy calories you're burning off with different levels of physical activity. It's a matter of balancing healthy eating (caloric energy) with the (molecular) energy that leaves your body through a healthy level of exercise.

What is BMI?

Body mass index assesses your body weight relative to height. It's a useful, indirect measure of body composition because it correlates highly with body fat in most people. To calculate your exact BMI value, multiply your weight in pounds by 703, divide by your height in inches, then divide again by your height in inches. Or, to find out where you stand check out the "My Life Check--Life's Simple 7" resources at mylifecheck.heart.org



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Control Cholesterol

Cholesterol is a soft, fat-like, waxy substance found in the bloodstream and in all your body's cells. It's normal to have cholesterol. Cholesterol is an important part of a healthy body because it's used for producing cell membranes and some hormones, and serves other needed bodily functions. But too much cholesterol in the blood is a major risk for coronary heart disease (which leads to heart attack) and for stroke.

What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol comes from two sources: your body and food. Your liver and other cells in your body make about 75% of blood cholesterol. The other 25% comes from the foods you eat.

LDL cholesterol is the “bad” cholesterol. When too much of it circulates in the blood, it can clog arteries, increasing your risk of heart attack and stroke. LDL cholesterol is produced naturally by the body, but many people inherit genes that cause them to make too much. Eating saturated fat, trans fats and dietary cholesterol also increases how much you have.

American Heart Association Recommendations

It's important for all people to know their cholesterol level. Total blood cholesterol is the most common measurement of blood cholesterol. Cholesterol is measured in milligrams per deciliter of blood (mg/dL). A cholesterol level of 200 mg/dL or higher puts you in a high-risk category and is cause to take action.

How to Lower Cholesterol

The good news is, you can lower your cholesterol and reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke. Whether you've been prescribed medication or advised to make diet and lifestyle changes to help manage your cholesterol, carefully follow your doctor's recommendations. To keep your cholesterol under control The American Heart Association recommends that you: schedule a screening, eat foods low in cholesterol and saturated fat and free of trans fat, maintain a healthy weight, and stay physically active.



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Stop Smoking

Impact of Smoking on Health

Smoking is the most important preventable cause of premature death in the United States. Smokers have a higher risk of developing many chronic disorders, including atherosclerosis — the buildup of fatty substances in the arteries — which can lead to coronary heart disease, heart attack (myocardial infarction) and stroke. Controlling or reversing atherosclerosis is an important part of preventing future heart attack or stroke.

Why It's Important to Quit

Smoking by itself increases the risk of coronary heart disease. When it acts with the other factors, it greatly increases your risk from those factors, too. Smoking decreases your tolerance for physical activity and increases the tendency for blood to clot. It decreases HDL (good) cholesterol. Your risks increase greatly if you smoke and have a family history of heart disease. Smoking also creates a higher risk for peripheral artery disease and aortic aneurysm. It increases the risk of recurrent coronary heart disease after bypass surgery, too.

Motivation and Support

During the quitting process, people often slip and have a cigarette. It's important not to feel like you failed at quitting; just give it another chance. If you need more support, look for quit-smoking programs through hospitals, health departments and hotlines with trained staff to help you. **Call the Illinois Tobacco Quitline at 1-866-784-8937.**

Talk to kids about cigarette smoking. Once cigarette smoking is initiated, it can be difficult to stop, even during adolescence.



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Reduce Blood Sugar

The American Heart Association considers diabetes one of the six major controllable risk factors for cardiovascular disease. Adults with diabetes are two to four times more likely to have heart disease or a stroke than adults without diabetes. Diabetes is treatable, but even when glucose levels are under control it greatly increases the risk of heart disease and stroke.

What Does this Mean?

Diabetes can cause your blood sugar to rise to dangerous levels. Most of the food we eat is turned into glucose, or sugar, for our bodies to use for energy. The pancreas, an organ near the stomach, makes a hormone called insulin to help glucose get into our bodies' cells.

Why is Reducing Blood Sugar So Important?

Pre-diabetes and subsequent type 2 diabetes usually results from insulin resistance. When insulin resistance or diabetes occur with other CVD risk factors (such as obesity, high blood pressure, abnormal cholesterol and high triglycerides), the risk of heart disease and stroke rises even more.

Controlling glucose can slow the progression of long-term complications. Often, many small changes add up to surprising improvements in diabetes control, including less need for medication.

American Heart Association Guidelines

When diabetes is detected, a doctor may prescribe changes in eating habits, weight control, exercise programs and medication to keep it in check. It's critical for people with diabetes to have regular check-ups. Work closely with your healthcare provider to manage your diabetes and control any other risk factors.



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Get Healthy – Start Now

No matter what day it is, it's never too late for all of us to make better choices for health. All you need is a goal, a plan and the desire to live better. The American Heart Association has created a simple way for you to know where you stand on the road to good health through seven steps all of us need to follow in order to live a healthy life.

Live Better with the Simple 7

To find out where you stand with these “simple seven”, take the **My Life Check Assessment** at mylifecheck.heart.org. In a few minutes you will have your own personal heart score and life plan. Your results will include seven recommended areas of focus and an action plan that is customized to your lifestyle and health outlook. Your last step is a promise: a resolution to make healthy positive changes step-by step, for a long healthy future.

My Life Check was designed by the American Heart Association with the goal of helping you live a long, productive life. These measures have three things in common: any person can make these changes, the steps are not expensive to take and even modest improvements to your health will make a big difference.

You can stop heart disease before it even starts. Start small and keep it simple. Make one change today and then you are ready to make another. Before you know it you have stopped making poor choices, and started making **LIFE** choices!

Get Active Eat Better Lose Weight Control Cholesterol
Manage Blood Pressure Reduce Blood Sugar Stop Smoking



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