

Preventing Coronary Artery Disease

Sometimes referred to as coronary heart disease or ischemic heart disease, coronary artery disease (CAD) is the most common type of heart disease in the United States.

For some people, a heart attack is the first sign of CAD. You and your health care team may be able to help reduce your risk for CAD.

Causes of CAD

CAD is caused by plaque buildup in the walls of the coronary arteries which supply blood to the heart and other parts of the body.

The plaque buildup is made up of deposits of cholesterol and other substances in the artery. Plaque buildup causes the inside of the arteries to narrow over time, which can partially or totally block the blood flow. This process is called atherosclerosis.

Symptoms of CAD

The most common symptom of coronary artery disease is angina, or chest pain and discomfort. Angina can occur when too much plaque builds up inside the arteries causing them to narrow.

Narrowed arteries can cause chest pain and discomfort because they can block blood flow to your heart muscle and the rest of your body.

For many people, the first sign that someone has CAD is a heart attack. Symptoms of a heart attack include:

- Chest pain or discomfort (angina)
- Weakness, lightheadedness, nausea or a cold sweat
- Pain or discomfort in the arms or shoulder
- Shortness of breath

Over time, CAD can also weaken the heart muscle. This can lead to heart failure, which is a serious condition where the heart is unable to pump blood the way it needs to.

Risk Factors for CAD

Many of the biggest risk factors for coronary artery disease and other cardiovascular diseases are due to lifestyle choices. Some of the most common risk factors include:

- Being overweight or obese
- Physical inactivity

- An unhealthy diet or poor eating habits
- Smoking tobacco

Unfortunately, even the healthiest lifestyle may not be enough to prevent heart disease. Some of the risk factors that cannot be controlled are:

- Family history of heart disease
- Age – individuals over 40 years old have an increased risk of developing heart disease

To help determine your risk for CAD, your health care team may measure the following:

- Blood pressure
- Blood cholesterol
- Blood sugar

Talk to your doctor about your risk for CAD.

Treatment and Prevention of CAD

Fortunately, many people can prevent or treat coronary artery disease with proper diet and lifestyle changes.

- **Early prevention.** Have your blood pressure and cholesterol checked regularly. Your doctor can provide suggestions to help you manage these conditions.
- **Regular exercise.** Even mild to moderate physical activity can lower blood pressure and reduce the risk of heart disease. The American Heart Association recommends exercising for 30 to 60 minutes most days a week. When you first begin, try exercising for 10 minutes each day and work your way up to the suggested time amount.
- **Proper diet.** A healthy diet can lower blood pressure and reduce cholesterol levels. Eat a high-fiber, low-sodium and low-fat diet that emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains and nuts and contains reduced amounts of red meat and eggs.
- **Drink alcohol in moderation.** Excess alcohol can lead to higher blood pressure and an increased risk of heart failure and stroke. Adults should consume no more than one to two alcoholic drinks a day to reduce the risk of heart disease.
- **Quit smoking.** Tobacco use has been proven to be a major contributing factor to cardiovascular disease. It is estimated that smokers' risk of heart attacks is more than twice the risk for non-smokers.
- **Manage stress.** Too much stress can lead to unhealthy lifestyle decisions, such as poor nutrition and lack of physical activity. Learn to cope with stress in order to alleviate its contribution to high blood pressure.

In more severe cases, where symptoms are frequent or blood flow needs to be restored, treatment might not only include life-style change but medications or surgical procedures.

Consult with your doctor about the best treatment options for CAD and whether you are at risk.

Resources

- The American Heart Association: www.americanheart.org
- The Center for Disease Control's Cardiovascular Health Program: www.cdc.gov/cvh/index.htm

- The Cleveland Clinic: www.clevelandclinic.org

Some content in this document was gathered from the website for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Their website is located at <https://www.cdc.gov>

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App: GuidanceNowSM

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