

Are you at Risk?

HEART ATTACK

Knowing your risk factors for a
heart attack can save your life



Not knowing you're at risk for heart disease can be the biggest risk of all. While a heart attack may happen to anyone, the American Heart Association says certain people carry more risk than others.

"Risk factors tell you more about the possibility of heart disease than any medical tests available," says Barry Bertolet, M.D., a board-certified cardiologist in private practice with Cardiology Associates of North Mississippi, P.A., and a member of North Mississippi Medical Center's medical staff. "If heart disease is discovered before you have a heart attack, it can be treated in a number of ways. Once the heart muscle is damaged, there is no way to bring it back."

Some risk factors for heart disease are clearly inherited, such as being male or having a family history of early heart attacks. Other risks may be partly inherited, such as a predisposition to high cholesterol, high blood pressure or obesity. And still other risks are basically chosen, such as smoking, a poor diet and a sedentary lifestyle.

Protect Yourself !

The following are considered to be some of the primary risk factors for developing heart disease (listed in alphabetical order):

Being male and over 45 or female and over 55. - About four out of five people who die of heart attacks are over 65. At older ages, women who have heart attacks are twice as likely as men to die from them within a few weeks.

Family history of heart disease. - Children of parents with cardiovascular disease are more likely to develop heart disease.

High total blood cholesterol. - "There are two main types of cholesterol important in heart health. They are low-density lipoprotein (LDL), which is also known as 'bad cholesterol,' and high-density lipoprotein (HDL), or 'good cholesterol,'" Bertolet explains. "A high level of HDL is good because it helps remove cholesterol from the arteries and prevents blockage. A high level of LDL can be detrimental because it leads to cholesterol deposits in the arteries, which in turn can cause heart attacks and strokes."

High blood pressure. - High blood pressure increases the heart's workload, causing the heart to enlarge and weaken over time. "When high blood pressure exists with obesity, smoking, high blood cholesterol or diabetes, the risk of heart attack increases several times," Bertolet warns.

Inactivity. - Regular aerobic exercise plays a significant role in preventing heart and blood vessel disease. Even modest levels of low-intensity physical activity are beneficial if done regularly and over the long term.

Poor stress management. - Some scientists have noted a relationship between heart disease and a person's life stress, behavior habits and socioeconomic status. These factors may affect established risk factors. For example, a person under stress may start smoking or smoke more than normal

Smoking or chronic exposure to tobacco smoke. - "Cigarette smoking is the largest risk factor for sudden cardiac death, and smokers who have a heart attack are more likely to die suddenly (within an hour) than non-smokers. Data also indicated that chronic exposure to secondhand smoke may increase the risk for heart disease," Bertolet says.

"There is evidence that smoking cessation, diet control, exercising and lowering cholesterol levels, as well as controlling high blood pressure, diabetes and other lifestyle changes, can lead to regression of heart disease," Bertolet says. "Physicians can give patients this information, guide and support them and prescribe appropriate medications, but it's really up to the individual patient to take control and make a difference in his or her own health."

**Five Steps to Reducing
Your Risk of
Heart Disease**

- * don't smoke
- * eat a low-saturated fat diet
- * have your blood pressure checked
- * physically active
- * speak to your physician about hormone replacement therapy if you are a woman past menopause

**For more information on heart disease and risk factors,
call the North Mississippi Medical Center Heart Institute
at 1-800-843-3375.**