

HEART HEALTH

The heart is the body's largest muscle. It has a demanding job, and not all risk factors associated with cardiovascular disease are within our power to control: family history, gender and race (men and African Americans are at higher risk), and early menopause are unmodifiable. What's more, men and women have different risk factors and different experiences with heart health.

There are, however, a few lifestyle-related risk factors that put patients in the red zone for heart attack and stroke.

MINIMIZE YOUR RISK FACTORS

- High blood pressure
- Smoking
- Sedentary lifestyle
- High Cholesterol
- Stress
- Obesity

KNOW YOUR NUMBERS

Your first and very best approach to understanding the risks to your heart health is to talk to your doctor at regular health exams or office visits. But a range of organizations like the American Heart Association have provided recommended guidelines to help patients monitor some key variables and watch their progression over time. Here are a few parameters to keep in mind:

- Blood pressure: Less than 120/80
- Cholesterol: Less than 180
- HDL: More than 60
- LDL: Less than 100
- Triglycerides: Less than 150
- Waist measurement: Smaller than 35 inches for a woman and smaller than 40 inches for a man



TIPS FOR A HEART-HEALTHY DIET

Control your portion size. It's easy to eat more calories than are ideal, but portion control is key. In addition to tracking serving sizes throughout the day, strategies like using smaller plates or eating more low-calorie, nutrient-dense foods can help.

Eat more vegetables and fruits. Their high fiber content helps clear bad cholesterol from the blood and may make you feel more full. To increase intake, keep them cleaned and on hand for snacks, adding into pasta and salads, or serving as the main ingredient in a meal.

Select whole grains. Replacing refined grains with whole grains increases fiber and provides nutrients that help regulate blood pressure and heart health. Grains like quinoa are a complete protein and make a wonderful meat substitute, and salads made from unique grains like farro and barley are a delicious way to get away from the ubiquitous white-bread sandwich at lunch.

Limit unhealthy fats. Eliminating saturated and trans fats is a critical step to lower cholesterol and reduce arterial damage, which can increase your risk of heart attack and stroke. Replacing solid fats like butter with monounsaturated fats like olive oil is a good start. Read packaged food labels to find clue words like "partially hydrogenated" to identify and avoid hidden trans fats.

Choose low-fat protein sources. Eating poultry and cold-water fish (salmon, mackerel, herring) is a good way to trim overall dietary fat and triglycerides. Another approach is to substitute plant protein for animal protein a couple times a week.

Reduce your sodium intake. No more than a teaspoon of sodium a day is ideal in otherwise healthy adults, as it can contribute to high blood pressure. Read the labels on your food sources and choose low-sodium versions. Better yet, avoid prepackaged food altogether to gain better control of overall salt intake.