

Heart Disease

Introduction

Heart Disease is defined as any disease condition that effects the heart¹. It is also called cardiovascular disease. High blood pressure, coronary heart disease (heart attacks / chest pain), and stroke are all forms of cardiovascular disease². Coronary heart disease is the narrowing or blockage of the arteries and vessels that provide oxygen and nutrient-rich blood to the heart. It is caused by atherosclerosis, an accumulation of fatty materials on the inner linings of arteries that restricts blood flow²⁻³.

Risk Factors

The American Heart Association has identified several risk factors. Some of them can be modified, treated or controlled, and some can't. The more risk factors you have, the greater your chance of developing coronary heart disease. Also, the greater the level of each risk factor, the greater the risk.

Major risk factors that can't be changed:

- Increasing age
- Male sex (gender)
- Heredity (including Race)

Major risk factors that can be controlled, changed, or modified:

- Tobacco smoke
- High blood cholesterol
- High blood pressure
- Physical inactivity
- Obesity and overweight
- Diabetes mellitus

Note: All the information found in this section (Risk Factors) came directly from the American Heart Association Web site and not from the author. This is an abbreviated version. For more complete information on risk factors for coronary heart disease please visit their site at <http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=4726> 

Prevention

There are many steps that can be taken to reduce the risk of getting heart disease.

- Receive a physical exam from your medical doctor -The first and most important step that you can take is to make an appointment with your medical doctor. Have them check your heart and see how it is working. Ask to have your blood pressure and cholesterol levels measured. Discuss with them any problems or concerns that you might have. Inquire about starting an exercise program. Having regular checkups by your medical doctor can help detect problems early and allow for treatment that may help decrease pain and suffering, as well as medical expenses.
- Eat a balanced diet – Committing to better eating habits can decrease your risk of a heart attack⁴. This includes selecting foods that are good for you and preparing them in a healthy way.
- Begin an exercise program – Once you visit with your doctor and receive clearance, have FUN! Do something that you enjoy. Get out. Get moving. Your opportunities are endless. Below are a few ideas to consider:
 - Walking
 - Swimming
 - Bicycling
 - Aerobics (try it out in the water!)
 - Rollerblading
 - Running

When selecting an activity, just remember one thing: Choose to Move! Your activity should be something that you can do continuously, for an extended period of time. If you get bored with one activity switch to another. Invite a friend, or form a group. This will cut down on boredom, create or improve friendships, and give you one added reason not to miss that workout. A few other ideas to consider when selecting an activity are listed below:

Level of fitness – Your level of fitness is something to take into consideration when selecting an activity. Whatever the activity, start out slow. Give your body a chance to adapt to your increased physical activity. Gradually increase your speed, time, and or distance until you reach your desired level.

Skill level – It is important to choose something that you feel comfortable doing. Balance, hand - eye coordination, and strength are things that can impact your ability to perform certain activities. Avoid activities that are too difficult for you to perform. This will keep you from getting discouraged and stopping your exercise program.

Convenience – This might be the most important thing to consider when selecting an activity. You want to choose something that you will actually do. The easier it is the more times you will do it. Some activities are strictly seasonal, require certain equipment, or are overly expensive.

Stress – Some activities (jumping or pounding) place a lot of stress on the body. This can cause pain and discomfort which can lead to injury.

It does not require much to enjoy the benefits of physical activity. By following these guidelines recommended by The American College of Sports Medicine you will be on your way to having a happier healthier heart⁵.

1. Exercise 3 to 5 days a week
2. Warm up for 5 to 10 minutes before aerobic activity
3. Maintain your exercise intensity for 30 to 45 minutes
4. Gradually decrease the intensity of your workout, then stretch to cool down for the last 5-10 minutes

References

1. Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary
2. American Heart Association web site
<http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=4478>
3. Ford-Martin, P., & Odle, T. G. (2002). The Gale Encyclopedia of Alternative Medicine. Gale Group Farmington Hills, MI.
4. American Heart Association web site
<http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=1200009>
5. American College of Sports Medicine web site
<http://www.acsm.org/pdf/Guidelines.pdf>