

February 2019 Issue

Know Your Risk for Heart Disease

Heart disease continues to be the number one killer of Americans, surpassing breast cancer, prostate cancer and lung cancer. The most common cardiovascular problems are heart attack and stroke, but there also are heart rhythm problems, heart failure (trouble with breathing and exertion) and valve issues.



Assess Your Risk for Heart Disease

New assessment tools allow you to evaluate your risk of certain heart events 10 years from now and across your lifetime. "Start with your primary care physician or your cardiologist to learn about an assessment and when you should have one. You also can go to the Internet for tools, if you know your cholesterol numbers and blood pressure," says TriHealth Heart Institute Cardiologist [Asimul Ansari, MD](#).

Dr. Ansari recommends having a risk assessment by your 40s — or sooner if you smoke, or have a family history of heart disease, diabetes or high cholesterol. He notes that having a family history of heart disease doesn't mean that you are destined to have the same problems. "With screenings and imaging techniques to identify risk factors, and early intervention, you don't necessarily have to develop disease," he continues.

Steps to a Healthier Heart

Whether you are working to prevent heart disease or you already have disease and want to keep it from progressing, Dr. Ansari, in accordance with the American Heart Association, recommends general guidelines for optimal heart health:

- Exercise at least 150 minutes per week.
- Don't smoke. If you do smoke, quit.
- Assess your weight using the body mass index scale (BMI), an estimate of your body fat based on height and weight. Strive for a "normal" BMI of 18.5 to 24.9.
- Keep blood pressure below 120/80.
- Have fasting blood glucose less than 100 milligrams/deciliter.
- Keep total cholesterol less than 200 milligrams/deciliter.
- Eat a healthy diet with plenty of fruits and vegetables, fiber-rich grains, fish twice a week, sodium less than 1,500 milligrams per day and minimal sugar-sweetened desserts and beverages.

"Have a mentality of doing this for the long-term, and focus on realistic, achievable goals," Dr. Ansari says. "Create a support system of family, friends and health care providers to help you. The end result will be a healthier heart and a higher quality of life." Being aware of factors that increase your risk of developing heart disease is the first step to preventing or slowing the progression of disease.

Can Friends and Feelings Affect Your Heart Health?

When it comes to heart health, your social connections and emotions might have a significant impact in addition to your diet and activity level. Your heart and brain are intimately connected. When your emotions adversely affect your brain, your heart is affected as well. Recent studies have shown that stress, anxiety and depression can cause oxygen deprivation to the heart and abnormal heart rhythms. When patients with newly diagnosed heart disease become depressed, that depression increases the risk that a harmful heart-related event will occur within that year. Learning to better manage your stress and worry is beneficial to your heart health.



Loneliness also stresses your heart and the entire cardiovascular system. Exactly how loneliness harms the circulatory system remains a mystery. The leading thought is that social connectedness somehow influences brain regions that calm the body. The resulting release of hormones can affect blood pressure, the flexibility of arteries, and inflammation — a key underlying cause of heart disease.

How can you make connections between heart health and emotional/social wellbeing work in your favor? Here are a few good ways to begin:

- **Don't ignore stress or anxiety that overwhelms your life.** Talk to your primary care physician. Together, you can decide which of the many treatment options might be best for you. These might include counseling or relaxation techniques. If you meet the criteria for a diagnosis, treatment can help reduce symptoms, thereby protecting your brain and your heart.
- **Exercise.** Many recent studies have demonstrated that aerobic exercise can help you be more mentally nimble. Various types of aerobic exercise including jogging, swimming, walking and dancing have been proven to reduce anxiety and depression and to improve self-esteem.
- **Devote time and energy to your relationships.** Build new relationships by joining a club, taking a class or volunteering your time.

Keep in mind that investing in your emotional wellbeing and social wellbeing will benefit your heart. For more information on your heart health's connection to emotional wellbeing and social wellbeing, talk with your primary care physician, visit www.TriHealth.com/heart or contact your employer-sponsored employee assistance program, such as TriHealth EAP.

What to Do After a Heart-Health Issue

After experiencing any type of heart health issue, it's important to consult with your physician before returning to physical activity. Following the below steps can help reduce the odds of suffering from another issue.



1. **Take it easy until the doctor says so.**
 - Even if you start feeling better, it's crucial you do not push yourself too soon.
 - Ease back into your everyday routine, and you may have to modify daily activities, if needed.
2. **Enter cardiac rehab – EXERCISE.***
 - These designed programs monitor your condition and recovery process .
 - Any form of aerobic exercise is beneficial.
 - A few examples include swimming, bicycling, walking at a brisk pace or jogging.

If you notice any unusual symptoms during exercise, such as prolonged shortness of breath, weak limbs, or chest pain, stop right away and call 911 or seek emergency medical attention.

3. **Know when to seek medical attention.**

After having one heart issue, the risk increases for experiencing another. Therefore, it is vital to be aware of and report any symptoms to your doctor immediately.