



IT'S YOUR HEALTH

This article was produced in collaboration with the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Heart Disease – Heart Health

The Issue

Although mortality rates have decreased over the past 40 years, heart disease is still one of the leading causes of death for Canadian men and women. You can reduce your risk of developing heart disease by understanding the risk factors that cause it, and by making the necessary changes to your lifestyle.

Background

Heart disease, along with stroke, belongs to a category of illnesses called cardiovascular (CV) diseases. These chronic diseases claim more than 70,000 lives per year in Canada. In addition, an estimated 1.6 million Canadians are living with heart disease or the effects of a stroke.

Factors that increase the risk of CV diseases include family history and age, being a smoker, lack of exercise, unhealthy eating, being overweight, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes and stress. According to recent research, nine in ten Canadians over the age of 20 have at least one risk factor, and four in ten have three or more risk factors.

In addition, certain populations, including Aboriginals and certain ethnic groups, such as South Asians, are at an increased risk for CV diseases.

Research also shows that up to 80% of premature CV disease is preventable. The key to reducing your risk of heart disease

is to modify the risk factors that are within your control.

Risk Factors for Heart Disease

Some risk factors for heart disease are beyond your control, such as:

Family history – Your risk is higher if any immediate family members (parents, brothers and sisters, etc.) have had a heart attack or if they have high cholesterol or high blood pressure.

Age – Your risk of developing heart disease increases with age. This applies especially to men over the age of 45 and women who have gone through menopause or are over the age of 55.

However, many of the risk factors for heart disease are within your control:

Smoking – Smoking raises risks by increasing blood pressure and contributing to the development of blocked arteries.

Lack of exercise – People who do not exercise regularly are at a greater risk of having heart disease.

Unhealthy eating – Risks are greater for those who do not eat fruits and vegetables in the amounts recommended in Canada's Food Guide. Eating foods that contain trans fat, high amounts of saturated fats, and high levels of sodium can also increase your risk of heart disease.

Eating too much sodium – While the body needs some sodium to function, too much may lead to high blood pressure, a major risk factor for stroke, heart disease and kidney disease. Most Canadians consume more sodium than may be good for their health.

Being overweight – Being overweight or obese increases your risk of developing a wide range of serious diseases and conditions including heart disease, high blood pressure, and Type 2 diabetes.

High cholesterol – Cholesterol is one of the fats in your blood, and having too much of the so-called bad cholesterol (LDL cholesterol) can lead to blockage of the arteries. This, in turn, raises the risk of heart disease.

High blood pressure – Over time, high blood pressure causes the heart to weaken. It is also a major risk factor for stroke, particularly when blood pressure is very high.

Diabetes – Diabetes increases the risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke, especially if blood sugar levels are poorly controlled.

Stress – High levels of stress or prolonged stress may result in high cholesterol, increased blood pressure or disturbances in heart rhythm, and these conditions increase the risk of developing heart disease.

Minimizing Your Risk

You can minimize your risk of developing heart disease by adopting a heart-healthy lifestyle. Learn more about your risk factors for heart disease, and try to change the ones that you can control. There are many good resources to guide you through this process. (See the *Need More Info?* section at the end of the article for links to the resources mentioned below.)

- Be a non-smoker. Free help is available online and by telephone to help you quit smoking.
- Build physical activity into your everyday life. Where possible, walk instead of driving. When practical,

take the stairs instead of the elevator. Start by aiming for 30 minutes of moderate physical activity each day. More is better. Canada's Physical Activity Guides to Healthy Active Living contain suggestions to help people of all ages get started.

- Develop healthy eating habits. Consult Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide, and then put the tips and recommendations into practice. For example:
 - Consume the daily number of fruit and vegetable servings recommended for someone your age and sex. For a majority of Canadians, this means eating more fruit and vegetables, including at least one dark green and one orange vegetable each day.
 - Avoid trans fat, and limit your intake of saturated fats and sodium by choosing more fresh, unprocessed foods to eat or prepare at home in place of prepackaged, convenience foods.
 - Read nutrition labels so you can make informed choices about foods.
 - Achieve and maintain a healthy body weight by adjusting the amount of food you eat and by building physical activity into your daily life.
 - Talk to your healthcare provider about your risk factors for heart disease, and learn how to manage any health conditions that may increase your risk. Early detection and treatment of high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and diabetes can greatly reduce your risk of developing heart disease.
 - Learn how to manage stress. Because everyone is different, there is no single way to prevent or manage stress. One idea is to consult the It's Your Health article called Coping with Stress. It outlines a number of approaches, and one or more of these may work for you. The article also identifies

resources that can help you learn to manage stress.

- Teach your children about heart-healthy habits, and lead by example. All of the steps listed above will help reduce your family's risk of developing heart disease and will also lower your risk of developing other chronic diseases, including many types of cancer.

The Public Health Agency of Canada's Role

The Public Health Agency of Canada works with stakeholders at all levels to provide leadership in the prevention and control of chronic diseases. As part of this work, the Public Health Agency of Canada supports research on the causes and prevention of heart disease, conducts surveillance on heart disease, and develops educational materials to help Canadians minimize their risk. The Public Health Agency of Canada also funded the development of *the Canadian Heart Health Strategy and Action Plan*, which was released in February 2009.

Need More Info?

Visit the following Public Health Agency of Canada web pages:

- **Centre for Chronic Disease Prevention and Control**, at:
www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ccdpc-cpcm/index_e.html
- **Cardiovascular Disease**, at:
www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/cd-mc/cvd-mcv/index-eng.php
- **2009 Tracking Heart Disease and Stroke in Canada**, at:
www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/2009/cvd-avc/index-eng.php
- For more on the *Canadian Heart Health Strategy and Action Plan* visit:
www.chhs-scsc.ca/web/



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Also, see the following:

• **Health Canada's Quit Smoking web section**, at:

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hc-ps/tobac-tabac/quit-cesser/index-eng.php.

This site offers a free copy of *Your Guide to becoming a Non-smoker*.

• For a list of toll-free “**Quit Lines**” by province, go to:

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hc-ps/tobac-tabac/quit-cesser/nou-maintenant/1-800/prov-eng.php

• **Physical Activity Guides to Healthy Active Living** at:

www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/pau-uap/paguide/

• **Eating well with Canada's Food Guide** at: www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide

• **The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada** at:

www.heartandstroke.ca.

• For a free online assessment of your **risk factors for heart disease and stroke**, go to:

ww2.heartandstroke.ca/hs_Risk.asp?media=hsf_hmpg

• **The Canadian Hypertension Society** at:

www.hypertension.ca/

Also, see the following *It's Your Health* articles:

• **Obesity** at:

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/life-vie/obes-eng.php

• **Sodium** at:

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/food-aliment/sodium-eng.php

• **Trans Fat** at:

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/food-aliment/trans-eng.php

Nutrition Labelling at:

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/life-vie/labelling-etiquetage-eng.php

Type 2 Diabetes at:

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/diabete-eng.php

Coping with Stress at:

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/life-vie/stress-eng.php

Stroke at:

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/stroke-vasculaire-eng.php

• For additional articles on health and safety issues go to the *It's Your Health* web section at: www.healthcanada.gc.ca/iyh

You can also call toll free at 1-866-225-0709

or TTY at 1-800-267-1245*