

Heart disease risk factors

Please contact our Cardiac Rehab department for your personalized risk factor management and exercise plan. We will work with you and your family to help you make small changes that add up to big results.

Risk factors increase your chance of getting certain diseases or making an existing disease worse. Certain risk factors may increase the possibility of fats and cholesterol building up in the coronary arteries. The more risk factors you have, the higher your chance of getting coronary artery disease, which could lead to having angina or a heart attack.

You can change or control some of your risk factors, including smoking, diabetes, stress, high blood pressure, abdominal obesity, being inactive and abnormal levels of cholesterol.

Risk factors you cannot control include your family history, gender, age and ethnic background.

Reference: Canadian guidelines for cardiac rehabilitation and cardiovascular disease prevention

Smoking

Smoking is the most common preventable cause of death in Canada. Smoking causes almost half of all deaths from heart disease among Canadians (Heart & Stroke Foundation).

If you smoke, you are more likely to develop blood clots in your arteries. Smoking also decreases the good cholesterol (HDL) in your blood. The carbon monoxide in the cigarettes takes away oxygen from your blood. Your resting heart rate and blood pressure increase when you smoke, which makes your heart work harder and damages the inside of your blood vessels. In turn, this increases the opportunity for plaque to build up. Your vessels can also spasm, reducing blood flow.

Quitting smoking reduces your risk of coronary artery disease significantly! You may be afraid that quitting will be too hard, but there is lots of help for you when you are ready. Try not to get discouraged or give up. It is never too late to quit smoking.

Resources

[Alberta Quits](#) (1-866-710-QUIT (7848)

[Canadian National Quit Smoking Line](#): 1-866-366-3667

Free apps

Quit Now: My Quit Buddy

Break it Off

KWIT

Quit it Lite

Diabetes

Diabetes is a condition in which the body cannot properly use glucose because:

- There is not enough insulin to move the glucose into the cells (Type 1), or
- There is resistance/intolerance of the cells to insulin (Type 2)

The result is higher sugar levels in the blood. This can weaken the inside of the blood vessels, making them more prone to plaque buildup and causing narrowing of the arteries.

Work closely with your healthcare team to find out the target for your blood sugar levels. Learn how to monitor your blood sugar and let your doctor know if you cannot keep it ~~in control~~ within recommended levels. It is important to keep all your risk factors under good control as having diabetes may increase the impact they have on your heart health.

Reference: Canadian guidelines for cardiac rehabilitation and cardiovascular disease prevention

Resources

[Diabetes.ca](https://diabetes.ca)

[Diabetes Toolbox](#)

[Information & Support: Virtual Care](#)

Chronic stress & mental health

When stressful situations occur often, with little or no time to relax, the chronic stress response occurs. The stress hormones produced can affect your heart by increasing your heart rate and blood pressure, elevating cholesterol and increasing blood clotting factor levels. This can cause damage to your arteries which increases the chance of developing coronary artery disease.

Recognizing your stressors and learning to control your reaction to them is important to your overall health. Talk to your health care team if you need some help managing your stress and mental health.

Resources

[MyHealth.Alberta.ca: Stress management](https://myhealth.alberta.ca)

[MyHealth.Alberta.ca: Breathing exercises for relaxation](https://myhealth.alberta.ca)

[Alberta Health Services: Mental Health Help Line](#)

[Alberta Health Services: 24/7 Adult Intake Services](#) (or call 211)

Free apps

Headspace (meditation, exercises, anxiety, stress focus)

Calm (meditation and facilitating sleep)

Blood pressure

Blood pressure is the force that blood exerts on the walls of your arteries. If your blood pressure is high, your heart has to work harder than normal to pump the blood through your arteries. This can weaken your arteries and heart over time, increasing your risk of heart disease.

Taking your medications as prescribed, maintaining a healthy weight, minimizing alcohol, getting regular aerobic exercise, eating a low-sodium diet and not smoking all help to reduce and control your blood pressure. Speak to your health care provider about what blood pressure is considered high for you.

Resource

[MyHealth.Alberta.ca: Manage your blood pressure](https://myhealth.alberta.ca/Manage-your-blood-pressure)

Controlling your weight

Achieving and maintaining a healthy weight reduces your risk of heart disease. It can also help control high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes. You can assess your weight by identifying your [body mass index \(BMI\)](#) and/or measuring your waist circumference.

Even if you are at a healthy weight, too much fat around your waist can increase your risk of heart disease. People with apple shapes have a higher risk of heart disease than people with pear shaped bodies.

Your risk is increased if your waist is:

- More than 94 cm or 37 inches (in males)
- More than 80 cm or 31.5 inches (in females)

Some ethnic groups or people living with risk factors may have an increased risk of heart disease even at a lower waist circumference.

Reference: [Living well with heart disease](#) (Heart & Stroke Foundation)

Resources

[Canada Food Guide](#)

[Healthy Eating Resources](#)

[Nutrition Labelling](#)

Physical activity

Regular exercise can be a life saver. Literally.

At least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity five times a week can reduce your risk of heart disease. Regular exercise is one of the most important things you can do for your health. It is also a great way to maintain a healthy weight, lower high blood pressure, lower high blood sugar, lower cholesterol levels and manage stress.

Talk to your health care team about a safe way for you to start a regular exercise program.

Resource

[Physical activity & your health](#)

Cholesterol levels

There are three main types of fats (lipids) normally found in the blood and in the cells of the body:

- LDL (low density lipoprotein): also known as bad cholesterol because it can increase your plaque buildup, which in turn increases your risk of a heart attack.
- HDL (high density lipoprotein): also known as good cholesterol because it helps move bad cholesterol to the liver for breakdown. High levels are good!
- Triglycerides: a type of fat (not a type of cholesterol). Your body switches some calories from food to triglycerides.

You can control your cholesterol and triglycerides by:

- Following a healthy diet
- Limiting alcohol consumption
- Exercising regularly
- Quitting smoking
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Taking prescribed medications as directed

Resources

[Learning about high cholesterol](#)

[Managing cholesterol](#)

[HeartandStroke.ca](#)

[MyHealth.Alberta.ca](#)