

## CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE PREVENTION TIPS

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Cardiovascular disease is a general term encompassing heart attack, stroke, and other diseases of the heart and blood vessel system. Traditionally thought to be a disease primarily affecting men, more women die of cardiovascular disease than from breast and uterine cancer combined. It is the number one cause of death in Canada in both males and females. This article identifies five modifiable risk factors and prevention strategies associated with cardiovascular disease.

1. **SMOKING** – Smoking is the most preventable risk factor for cardiovascular disease. Smokers are two to three times more likely to develop cardiovascular disease than a nonsmoker. Tobacco smoke contains more than 4,800 chemicals that can harm your heart and blood vessels. The act of smoking decreases oxygen levels in the blood and to the heart, promotes inflammation and fatty deposits in the arteries, and makes the blood more prone to clotting. It also makes your heart work harder by constricting blood vessels and increasing your heart rate and blood pressure. The good news is that an individual's risk for cardiovascular disease decreases dramatically within one year of quitting smoking.

2. **EAT HEART HEALTHY** – Heart healthy eating can help maintain a healthy body weight, which in turn reduces the risk of high levels of blood cholesterol and triglycerides, blood pressure, and blood sugar. Good choices are wholesome and unprocessed foods that are low in refined starch, sugar and sodium. Get plenty of fibre from whole grains, legumes, fresh fruits and vegetables. Avoid major sources of saturated and trans-fats such as deep-fried fast foods, packaged snack foods, crackers, cookies, butter, margarine, palm and kernel oils, and fatty meats. A diet rich in Omega-3 fatty acids may decrease your risk of heart attack, protect against irregular heartbeats and lower blood pressure. Omega-3 fatty acids can be found in salmon, sardines, flaxseeds, walnuts, canola and olive oils. Any alcohol intake should be limited to one drink a day for women, and two a day for men. Excessive alcohol intake can contribute to undesired increases in body weight and disruption of healthy blood sugar and fat levels.



3. **REGULAR EXERCISE** – Excess body fat, especially in the waist area, increases the heart's workload and can elevate blood pressure and cholesterol. It also decreases the body's response to insulin, a risk factor for diabetes. Diabetes can quadruple your risk for cardiovascular disease because it usually involves abnormal levels of blood fats (cholesterol and triglycerides) that can promote plaque formation. Regular exercise offers many benefits: it strengthens the heart muscle and makes it a more efficient pump, helps to maintain a healthy body

weight, controls blood pressure and blood fat/sugar levels, and helps to reduce stress. The *Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada* recommends at least 30 minutes of activity per day such as brisk walking.

- 4. MANAGE MENTAL HEALTH** – Stress has been identified as a cardiovascular disease risk factor. The human stress response activates the release of cortisol, a hormone that can elevate your heart rate and increase blood pressure, and cholesterol levels. Cortisol also plays a role in the accumulation of abdominal fat, a risk factor for cardiovascular disease. Individuals with poor stress coping mechanisms further exacerbate their cardiovascular health by engaging in habits such as overeating, smoking, and drinking alcohol. Regular exercise is one positive coping mechanism that can help individuals deal with everyday stressors. Regular restful sleep is another positive coping mechanism that allows for important biological systems to recover and recharge and help deal with physical and emotional stress. Individuals who suffer from chronic depression and anxiety are encouraged to seek help as these two factors have also been identified as cardiovascular risk factors.



- 5. GET REGULAR HEALTH SCREENINGS** – High blood pressure (hypertension) and cholesterol can damage your cardiovascular system. Both give an indication as to the status of your cardiovascular health. But without testing them, you probably won't know whether you have these conditions. Regular screening can tell you what your numbers are, and whether action needs to be taken. High blood pressure usually causes no symptoms until complications develop. Adults should have their blood pressure checked at least every two years. Elevated blood pressure means that your heart is working harder to pump an adequate amount of blood to all of the tissues of the body. Warning signs of advanced hypertension may include headaches, sweating, rapid pulse, shortness of breath, dizziness, and visual disturbances. Optimal blood pressure is less than 120/80 mm/hg. A high blood cholesterol level, especially "bad" LDL cholesterol, is considered to be a contributor to plaque building up in the arteries and impeded blood flow to the brain, kidneys, genitals, extremities, and heart. It is among the primary causes of cardiovascular disease, because cholesterol produces deposits in arteries.

It is best to address vulnerability to cardiovascular disease as early as possible, especially if there is a family history of such disease. Cardiovascular disease may be a leading cause of death but there are many preventative strategies that can be implemented to minimize and even avoid its effects.

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