Lower your risk of heart disease

Heart disease kills one person in the United States every 34 seconds, and it's the number-one killer of American women, according to the American Heart Association (AHA). These are scary statistics but there's good news: You can significantly reduce your risk of heart disease by eating right, exercising, and not smoking.

That may sound like a tall order, but don't worry, you're not alone. Blue Shield can help you climb off the couch and make some healthy lifestyle changes. Check out the information below, then get more resources by logging in to Healthy Lifestyle Rewards at **blueshieldca.com/hlr.** You'll find personalized tools and programs that can help you eat better, exercise regularly, quit smoking, and more.

Here are some guidelines to help you lessen your risk of heart disease.

1. Know your numbers

It's important to keep track of your blood pressure, which shows how hard your heart is working to pump blood, and your cholesterol and triglyceride levels, which show how much artery-clogging fat is in your bloodstream. All three have a big impact on your risk of heart attack and stroke.

If you don't know what your numbers are, or haven't had them checked for some time, you may have a problem and not realize it. For example, one third of Americans who have high blood pressure aren't even aware of their condition. So visit your doctor regularly for a checkup and cholesterol/ triglyceride screening.

Numbers to watch

Blood pressure

- Normal: Below 120/80
- High: 140/90 or higher

Cholesterol

- LDL ("bad" cholesterol) can clog your arteries and increase your risk of heart disease. LDL should be less than 100 mg/dL.
- HDL ("good" cholesterol) carries LDL cholesterol away from your arteries and helps protect you from heart attack and stroke. HDL should be more than 60 mg/dL.
- Total (HDL plus LDL) should be less than 200 mg/dL

Triglycerides

- Normal: less than 150 mg/dL
- Borderline high: 150 to 199 mg/dL
- High: 200 or more mg/dL

2. Get moving

Regular exercise can help you lose weight and significantly improve your cholesterol/triglyceride levels. And don't think you have to train for the Ironman to benefit. As little as 30 minutes a day, five days a week, of moderate activity such as brisk walking, swimming, biking, or dancing will make a difference, according to the AHA. For vigorous activity such as running, the recommended minimum is 20 minutes, three times a week. And if you can do more, that's even better.

One other thing: If you have a high risk of heart disease or other chronic condition, or you've been inactive for a long time, see your doctor before starting any new exercise program.

3. Watch your diet

A healthy diet is another way to help your heart stay healthy. Here are some recommendations on what to eat and what to avoid.

Do eat:

Vegetables and fruits

They're high in vitamins, minerals, and fiber, are low in calories, and can help you control your weight and blood pressure. The AHA recommends eating eight or more servings of varied fruit/vegetables a day, totaling about 4 1/2 cups. Fresh is best, but if you have to eat canned or frozen varieties, avoid those with a lot of sodium.

Whole-grain foods

They contain fiber that can help lower your LDL cholesterol. Plus they can help you manage your weight because they make you feel full. On food labels the whole grain should be the first ingredient listed (look for "whole" or "whole grain" before the grain's name). For example, choose foods that contain whole wheat, graham flour, oatmeal, whole oats, brown rice, wild rice, whole-grain corn, popcorn, whole-grain barley, whole-wheat bulgur, or whole rye.

Fish

Varieties that contain a lot of omega-3 fatty acids (such as salmon, trout, and herring) may help lower your risk of heart disease. Eat fish at least twice a week.

Lean meat/poultry

Trim excess fat and skin before cooking your meat/poultry, then grill, bake, or broil it. Choose white meat when you're eating poultry.

Dairy

Minimize your intake of whole-fat products such as butter and whole milk. Select fat-free, 1% fat, and low-fat milk, yogurt, cheese and other dairy products.

Avoid eating:

Trans fats

These man-made fats (called "partially hydrogenated vegetable oils" on ingredient lists) raise your LDL cholesterol and lower your HDL. Read labels and avoid them. When eating out, ask what kind of oil the food is cooked in. Common examples include French fries, pastries, cookies, crackers, stick margarines, and shortening.

Cholesterol

Dietary cholesterol is found in animal products such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs, butter, cheese, and whole and 2% milk. It's not found in foods made from plants. Aim to eat less than 300 milligrams of cholesterol each day.

Salt

Too much salt (sodium) can raise your blood pressure and increase your risk of heart disease. Choose and prepare foods with little or no salt, and aim to eat less than 1500 milligrams of sodium a day. Common sources include tomato sauce, soups, condiments, canned food, processed meats, and prepared mixes. Some medications also contain sodium.

4. Stop Smoking

It's pretty simple – if you're a smoker, quitting is one of the best things you can do for your heart. Just one year after quitting, you'll have cut your risk of heart disease in half, according to the American Cancer Society. Fifteen years after quitting, your risk will be the same as someone who never smoked.

Health Lifestyle Rewards

You can find more useful information at Healthy Lifestyle Rewards, an online program that helps you work on living a healthy lifestyle. Just log in, use the tools and programs, and begin reaping all the rewards of a healthy lifestyle. To start, register at **blueshieldca.com/hlr**.

More resources

Information from the American Heart Association about the causes of heart disease and how to lower your risks:
www.americanheart.org and select *Healthy Lifestyle*

Tips on how to add more fruits and vegetables to your daily diet, plus tools to help you calculate how many servings you need:
www.fruitsandveggiesmatter.gov

The latest federal exercise guidelines for children, adults, and older adults:
www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity

Resources to help you quit smoking, from the National Cancer Institute:
www.smokefree.gov