



VA/DoD CLINICAL PRACTICE GUIDELINE FOR HEART DISEASE RISK REDUCTION

Department of Veterans Affairs
Department of Defense

Patient Summary

I. What is cardiovascular disease?

You probably know someone who has had a heart attack or a stroke, which is a result of cardiovascular disease. Cardiovascular disease is a process that occurs over many years. Over time, fats in the blood, called cholesterol, build up in our arteries. This buildup is called plaque. Plaque can narrow the blood vessels and reduce the blood flow and oxygen to the heart. Sometimes a piece of plaque or blood clot breaks off and gets stuck in an artery to the heart or brain. This sudden blockage causes a lack of oxygen to the heart or brain, resulting in a heart attack or stroke. Heart attacks and strokes can permanently damage the heart muscle and brain or cause death.

II. How to reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease:

Many factors increase the risk of cardiovascular disease. Smoking, high blood pressure, diabetes, being overweight, inadequate physical activity and eating an unhealthy diet all increase risk. These factors are within our power to change. Cholesterol levels change with these factors but sometimes can show increased risk due to our genetic makeup. Other factors that increase risk that we cannot change are our age, being male, and having family members with heart attack or stroke.

If you have any of these risk factors, talk to your healthcare provider about ways to reduce your risk. Your provider will advise you on how to manage your blood pressure and diabetes control. Quitting smoking, choosing a heart healthy diet (see [Table 1. Summary of the Mediterranean Diet](#)), increasing physical activity (see [Table 2. Summary of Exercise Recommendations](#)), and losing weight (if you are overweight) are the most important ways to prevent a heart attack and stroke. Your healthcare provider can estimate your risk of a heart attack or stroke and show you how that risk will change based on the changes you make.

Changing behavior to improve your health can be difficult and can take time. Ask your healthcare provider to refer you to a registered dietitian, exercise physiologist, or tobacco educator who can guide you through these lifestyle changes.

Your healthcare provider may also prescribe medicines, called statins, to lower your risk of heart attack and stroke. Making changes to your lifestyle is a good first approach but statin medications are very effective at reducing risk. If you start medications, you usually continue them for a long time. Studies have shown that these medications continue to reduce risk of heart attack and stroke, which continues to increase with age.

III. Questions you can ask your care team:

- What are my cardiovascular risk factors?
- What does my risk assessment say about my ten-year risk of heart attack or stroke?
- How often should my cholesterol be checked?
- How often should my ten-year risk be assessed?
- What changes should I make to reduce my risk?
- Do I need to take medication? What are the possible side effects? How much benefit should I expect?

Table 1. Summary of the Mediterranean Diet [1]

| Eat More | Eat Less |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fruits and vegetables • Whole grains • Seafood (primarily fatty fish), skinless poultry • Tree nuts, peanuts, nut butters • Legumes • Olive oil • Low-fat milk and cheese • Red wine* | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Red meat • Processed meat • Full-fat milk and cheese • Butter or stick margarine • Commercial bakery goods • Avoid trans fat |

*Always ask your medical team if alcohol is ok for you to consume

Table 2. Summary of Exercise Recommendations

| Exercising to Lower Your Risk of Cardiovascular Disease |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid being sedentary. • Movement is better than no movement. Some exercise is better than no exercise. Even activities not typically thought of as exercise such as walking, doing the dishes, taking the stairs instead of the elevator, or working in the yard are associated with lower risk for cardiovascular disease. • Start low and go slow. Over days and weeks, try to add a little more movement as tolerated. Increasing activity too rapidly can lead to injuries and burn out. • Do as much as you can. The more you are physically active, the more you lower your risk! |

IV. References

1. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. *Mediterranean diet. Nutrition and Food Services* 2015; www.nutrition.va.gov/docs/UpdatedPatientEd/Mediterraneandiet.pdf. Accessed April 3, 2020.