

# Major Risk Factors for Cardiovascular Disease (CVD)



## Modifiable Risk Factors

- **Tobacco smoke** – Smokers have a much higher risk of developing CVD than non-smokers. Cigarette smoke is a powerful independent risk factor for sudden cardiac death in patients with coronary artery disease. Exposure to secondhand smoke increases risk of heart disease even for non-smokers.
- **High cholesterol** – Risk for CVD increases as your blood cholesterol level increases. Cholesterol levels are affected by age, sex, heredity, and diet.
- **High blood pressure** – High blood pressure increases the workload on the heart, which causes the heart muscle to thicken and become stiffer. As the heart muscle stiffens, the heart begins to function abnormally. High blood pressure also increases your risk of stroke, heart attack, kidney failure, and congestive heart failure. When high blood pressure is present along with obesity, smoking, high cholesterol or diabetes, the risk of heart attack or stroke increases even more.
- **Physical inactivity** – Regular, moderate to vigorous physical activity helps reduce the risk of CVD. Physical activity can help control cholesterol, diabetes, obesity, and blood pressure. An inactive lifestyle increases the risk of developing cardiovascular disease.
- **Obesity and being overweight** – People who have excess body fat, especially around the waist, are more likely to develop heart disease and stroke, even if they have no other risk factors. Overweight and obese individuals with risk factors for CVD such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or high blood sugar can make lifestyle changes to lose weight and produce significant reductions in risk factors such as triglycerides, blood glucose, hemoglobin A1c, and the risk of developing Type 2 diabetes.
- **Diabetes** – Diabetes significantly increases your risk of developing cardiovascular disease. Even when glucose levels are well controlled, diabetes increases the risk of heart disease and stroke. The risks are even greater if blood sugar is not well controlled. At least 68% of people with diabetes over age 65 die of some form of heart disease. Among that same group, 16% die of stroke.

## Non-Modifiable Risk Factors

*You may be born with certain risk factors that cannot be changed. The more of these risk factors you have, the greater your risk of developing CVD. Since you cannot do anything about these non-modifiable risk factors, it is even more important that you manage the risk factors that are within your control.*

- **Increasing age** – The majority of people who die of coronary artery disease are 65 or older. While heart attacks can strike both men and women in old age, women are at greater risk of dying.
- **Male gender** – Men have a greater risk of heart attack than women do, and men are more likely to have heart attacks earlier in life. Even though women’s risk of heart attack is less than that for men, their likelihood of dying from heart disease significantly increases, especially once women reach the age of menopause.
- **Heredity (including race)** – Children of parents with heart disease are more likely to develop heart disease. African Americans have more severe high blood pressure than Caucasians, and a higher risk of heart disease. Heart disease risk is also higher among Mexican Americans, American Indians, native Hawaiians, and some Asian Americans.

## Additional Risk Factors

- **Stress** – Some scientists have noted a relationship between CVD risk and stress in a person’s life, along with their health behaviors and socioeconomic status. Some people turn to coping mechanisms that negatively impact their health such as overeating, smoking, or increased alcohol use. All these behaviors can increase risk of CVD.
- **Alcohol** – Drinking too much alcohol can raise blood pressure and increase your risk of cardiomyopathy, stroke, cancer, and other diseases. Alcohol use can also contribute to high triglycerides and produce irregular heartbeats. You should limit your alcohol consumption to no more than two drinks per day for men and no more than one drink per day for women.
- **Diet and nutrition** – A healthy diet is one of the best weapons you have against CVD. Choose nutrient-rich foods that contain vitamins, minerals, fiber, and other nutrients, but have fewer calories than nutrient-poor foods. Choose a diet that emphasizes fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.