

## Preventing Heart Disease: An Update

Heart disease remains the leading cause of death for both men and women in the United States. Women still have a tendency to think of breast cancer as the biggest threat, but in fact risk of dying of heart disease is 1 in 3 for women, while that risk for breast cancer is 1 in 30. So heart disease, and its prevention, should be everybody's business. The good news is that we know a lot about the means to prevent heart disease, and most of it is at your disposal right now.

In both men and women, regular physical activity reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease. Most experts recommend a total of about 30 minutes of moderate intensity activity on most or all days.

Accumulating those 30 minutes in the course of your daily routine, as a part of work or errands or recreations, also confers benefit comparable to "exercise." In fact, heart disease risk can be reduced by a third to a half just by being active.

The link between diet and heart disease is common knowledge. There is some room for disagreement among experts about the optimal diet, and this can be confusing, but there is far more agreement, and the essentials are clear. Americans eat too much fat, and in particular too much saturated and trans fat. Saturated fat is found in red meats, cheese, and other dairy products for example. Included in the "red

meat" category is pork, deli meats, sausage, and pepperoni. These fats tend to cause plaque to develop in arteries by raising cholesterol, and as a result, may play an important role in heart disease.

The other type of fat to be avoided is "trans" fat. This fat is produced by modifying vegetable oils to give them a higher melting point. This helps make stick margarine, for example, that doesn't turn into a puddle at room temperature, and extends shelf life of many processed foods. Unfortunately, it seems to have the same tendency to stiffen one's arteries, and increase heart disease risk. The best way to identify trans fat is to look at ingredient labels and scan for "partially hydrogenated." The best way to avoid it is to limit intake of processed foods.

Two other types of fat, monounsaturated and polyunsaturated, are potentially beneficial to the heart, provided one doesn't eat too much total fat. Monounsaturates, found in olive oil, many nuts, and avocados, for example, are associated with low risk of heart disease in Mediterranean countries. There are different types of polyunsaturates, of which the omega-3's are most beneficial. These are found in flaxseeds, fish and seafood in particular. Keeping total fat limited is important in efforts to control weight, which in turn is very important to heart disease risk.



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Cholesterol in the diet is less important than fat; the occasional egg is probably fine. Salt should be restricted to control blood pressure. Whole grains, fruits and vegetables provide a range of beneficial nutrients and fiber, and should be eaten regularly. Moderate alcohol intake, roughly one drink a day, is likely beneficial for most; more is not.

Smoking, of course, should be avoided. Hormone replacement therapy for women at menopause has gotten controversial again, although I believe use of synthetic estrogens, such as raloxifene, is likely to reduce heart disease risk. A multivitamin supplement with antioxidants is quite reasonable; the folate may be especially beneficial.

Lifestyle interventions can reduce heart disease risk by 80% or more. So while the latest technology and breakthrough test may be exciting news, it's even better news if you take such good care of yourself, you never need them.

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*Preventive Medicine Column*

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