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Heart Health for Boomers

What you can do to prevent, or recover from, the most common heart-related conditions

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Despite all the advances in medical treatment, heart disease remains the number one cause of death in America, and Baby Boomers are of an age where heart problems seem to begin to manifest themselves.

Medical experts say heart ailments are also among the most preventable, which is why what we do in our 50s and 60s could make a big difference in whether we get heart disease. After age 65, the potential for heart disease starts to rise as you age, unless you take concerted action now.

Before we get to what you can do to prevent heart disease, let's look at two factors you can't control: whether you have a family history of heart disease, which is defined for men as having a parent or sibling who had a heart attack before the age of 55 or, for women, as having an immediate family member who had a heart attack before 65, or a congenital heart problem that you're born with. That was the case with Charlotte Libov, who is now in her 50s and the author of *The Woman's Heart Attack Recovery Guide*. At age 40, Charlotte had open heart surgery to correct a one inch hole in her heart.

Most of the other risk factors for heart disease you can control. Those factors are:

- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Being overweight or obese

As pointed out in the "Do You Know the Health Risks of Being Overweight?" by WIN (Weight Control Information Network), part of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, "losing 5 to 10 percent of your weight can lower your chances for developing coronary heart disease or having a stroke. " (So if you are an overweight woman who weighs 165 pounds, that amounts to losing between 8 and 16 pounds.)

- Lack of exercise
- Type II diabetes (which is caused by obesity)
- Stress, anxiety, anger, and depression

Various scientific studies as summarized in *Heart Healthy for Life* demonstrate a link among one or more of these emotions and an increased risk at having a heart attack. (To more effectively deal with these emotions, you may need the help of a psychologist or psychiatrist rather than an M.D.)

- Smoking tobacco

Stopping smoking not only lowers your risk of heart disease but avoiding exposure to secondhand smoke lowers the risk of heart attacks in non-smokers as well. (See "[Smoking Bans Cut Heart Attack Risks Associated with Secondhand Smoke](#)")

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Know your numbers

Dean Heller, M.D., a Miami, Florida-based cardiologist, is part of what's called a "Know your Number" campaign to help men and women to find out information that can help reduce their risk of coronary disease. What are those numbers?

They include BMI or body mass index, which will tell you if you're overweight or obese. The second number is your waist circumference, an easy number to find out just by using a tape measure. See "[Waist-Hip Ratio Measures Heart Attack Risks](#)" for a discussion of how to take a waist-to-hip ratio.

Researchers found that the waist-to-hip ratio is three times more accurate than BMI in predicting the risk of a heart attack.) Blood sugar is the third number; you find out your blood sugar level from a blood test that should be part of your annual medical check-up. Blood pressure is next and last but not least, are your cholesterol numbers. Your physician needs to know your LDL (the bad cholesterol), you HDL, the good cholesterol and triglycerides. Dr. Heller says, "A high LDL number is the most important risk factor for coronary disease."

Medication versus lifestyle

Many of the risk factors for heart disease can be helped through a physician's prescribed medications for high blood pressure or cholesterol; keep in mind that everyone reacts differently to medications, there may be side effects, and there is a cost associated with taking a drug for the rest of your life.

Lifestyle changes may be a preferred alternative to pharmacological treatments. That's the recommendation for lowering cholesterol by nutritionist Janet Brill, PhD., author of *Cholesterol Down*, a book that suggests ten simple steps to lowering your cholesterol without drugs.

Dr. Brill says, "Heart disease is almost completely preventable by making simple lifestyle changes. If you don't want to take medication where you have to take a pill every day the rest of your life and possibly have side effects that are very unpleasant if not life threatening you can do it all by adding in healthy foods like eating oatmeal everyday for breakfast, snacking on a handful of almonds, and putting on your sneakers and take a thirty minute walk every day."

Recognizing warning signs

How many Boomers have died from a heart-related emergency who could have been saved if someone realized that the "indigestion" the person was experiencing was really a symptom of a heart attack and got help immediately? There are three potentially fatal heart conditions that we all need to be able to recognize, and act promptly on: heart attack, stroke, and cardiac arrest. According to Dr. Nieca Goldberg, symptoms of a heart attack include:

- Sudden chest pressure (sometimes the pressure is lower down so it is mistaken for indigestion)
- Shortness of breath
- Sudden collapse

By contrast, here are the symptoms if someone is having a stroke:

- Severe headache
- Unable to speak
- Numbness in the face

Dr. Goldberg adds that if someone is having a heart attack, giving him or her an aspirin to chew on could save the person's life. However, she cautions not to give someone an aspirin if they're having a stroke "because some strokes are caused by bleeding" and aspirin could cause more bleeding.

What should you do if you're not sure if someone is having a heart attack or not? Robert O. Bonow, M.D., chief of cardiology at Northwestern University Hospital, and past president of the

American Heart Association, says if you're not sure if someone is having a heart attack, "Call 911. They are good at determining on the spot."

According to the American Heart Association, the warning signs for cardiac arrest are

- Sudden loss of responsiveness
- No normal breathing

At their website, the American Heart Association suggest that's "If these signs of cardiac arrest are present, tell someone to call 9-1-1 or your emergency response number and get an AED [automated external defibrillator] (if one is available) and begin CPR immediately."

These life-and-death conditions listed above are part of the "Act in Time" campaign that the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute has initiated to help save lives. (For more information on this new effort, go to their [website](#).)

Weight, diet and exercise

One reason heart disease remains the number one cause of death in this country is the increase in obesity which has reached epidemic proportions.

Forty-eight-year-old Keith Ahrens had a heart attack three years ago; his excessive obesity was a factor. Since his open heart surgery, he has lost over 200 pounds. He discusses his journey in his book *Outrunning My Shadow*. Leading up to Ahrens' heart surgery, he led a sedentary life, he ate "all the bad foods." He had elevated blood pressure, high cholesterol, and obesity. Says Ahrens: "I'm a good example of someone on the brink of almost certain death and I fought back and came back pretty strong."

Dr. Goldberg, author of *The Women's Healthy Heart Program*, is head of the new Women's Heart Program, just established at New York University. She says that a heart healthy diet need not be a complicated thing. It's simply a diet that is low in saturated fats, that uses the omega 3 fats in fish, olive oil, and the polyunsaturated fats you find in safflower or soy oil. "Make better food choices," says Dr. Goldberg. "Trade in white flour for more complex carbohydrates, grains, fruits, and vegetables." Decreasing portion sizes will also help you lose weight.

Half an hour of aerobic activity a day is what Dr. Goldberg recommends for a healthy heart. She adds, "If you want to lose weight, some studies say to increase to 45 to 60 minutes a day for as many days as you can."

An ounce of prevention

The survivors of heart attacks that I spoke with all agreed that they now wish they had taken preventive actions such as diet and exercise. Going through a heart attack, if you survive it, is a harrowing and frightening experience. The consensus is that if it does not kill you, it definitely makes you stronger, and more determined than ever to live a heart healthy life.

John Lawlor, an online strategist, had two open heart surgeries last year, when he was 64. They made such an impact on him that he's writing a book on his experiences as well as other open heart surgery patients. Lawlor is a strong advocate of patient support groups. He has learned so much, and gotten so much support from sharing his own experience with others who have gone through something similar.

Says Lawlor: "As a result of my surgical experiences, which were both outstanding, and recovery I have shifted the focus of my consulting work into working with hospitals to chronicle patient success stories into content for their social media communities to benefit patients and their hospitals."

Looking ahead

Since the risk of heart attack increases as we age, what we do now

can help us to be more heart healthy in the years ahead. Give up smoking, if you haven't already, move more, eat a healthier diet, and keep your blood pressure and cholesterol levels within a normal range. Or, if your numbers are high, make lifestyle changes to lower those numbers in addition to taking medication under a doctor's care, if that is recommended. All of these steps can help lower our risk of this preventable disease.

Resources

Associations

- [American Heart Association \(AHA\)](#) Started by six cardiologists in 1942, AHA has the mission "to build healthier lives, free of cardiovascular diseases and stroke." It is focused on research to reduce heart disease as well as educating the public.
- [American Stroke Association](#)
- [Mended Hearts](#) Non-profit membership association, affiliated with the American Heart Association, founded 50 years ago to direct help and support for heart patients and their families and caregivers.

Books and Articles

- "Do You Know the Health Risks of Being Overweight?" WIN (Weight Control Information Network) [National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases](#)
- Esselstyn, Caldwell B., Jr., M.D., Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease. New York: Avery Trade, 2008.
- Jaret, Peter. Heart Healthy for Life. Pleasantville, New York: Reader's Digest Association, 2002.

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