

CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE FACT SHEET

Developed by the National Alliance for Hispanic Health

What Is Cardiovascular Disease?

Cardiovascular disease (which includes high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and heart disease) affects the heart by narrowing the arteries and reducing the amount of blood the heart receives, which makes the heart work harder.

Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death across all racial and ethnic groups, accounting for more than 40 percent of all annual deaths in the U.S.

Cardiovascular conditions often come without pain or obvious symptoms. For that reason, they often go untreated. This can lead to even more serious health issues, including heart attack, stroke, and kidney damage. What is especially dangerous about cardiovascular disease is that you can have more than one condition at the same time without even knowing it.

Some conditions associated with cardiovascular disease include:

High Blood Pressure or Hypertension: This condition often begins without symptoms. It occurs when the blood pressure against the blood vessel wall is consistently above normal.

Hardening of the Arteries or Arteriosclerosis: This condition occurs when the arteries leading into the heart lose elasticity and the openings or the width of the arteries become clogged as a result of the accumulation of fat.

Clogging of the Arteries or Atherosclerosis: Arteries get clogged when their protective lining is damaged, allowing substances to build up inside the artery wall. This build-up, called plaque, is made up of cholesterol, waste materials from cells, fatty materials, and other substances.

Heart Attack: A heart attack occurs when a clot blocks part or all of the blood supply that goes directly to the heart muscle. When the blood flow is cut off completely, the heart muscle begins to die.

Stroke: A stroke occurs when a blood vessel that supplies blood to the brain is partially or completely blocked resulting in impairment of the brain due to reduction of the blood flow. Impairment of the brain, in turn, results in loss of body movements controlled by that portion of the brain.

Congestive Heart Failure: This condition occurs when the volume of blood output per heartbeat is decreased due to abnormal function of the heart muscle or valve structures. The blood supply to the body tissues is not enough to meet the appropriate demand for oxygen the tissues need for biological work.

What Are the Risk Factors for Cardiovascular Disease?

Without a doubt, the development of cardiovascular disease is associated with some specific health-adverse behaviors. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), those behaviors are:

- **Tobacco use**
Cigarette smoking causes a build up of plaque in the inner walls of our arteries. It is a major risk factor, and smokers have twice the chance of developing cardiovascular disease as non-smokers.
- **Lack of physical activity**
Individuals who don't engage in sufficient physical activity also have twice the chance of developing cardiovascular disease as those who are physically active. Physical inactivity can also predispose you to obesity and diabetes, both of which can also promote cardiovascular disease.
- **Eating habits**
Individuals who are overweight are at a higher risk for having high cholesterol and developing hypertension and other chronic cardiovascular conditions than those who maintain a healthy weight. It is estimated that only 18 percent of women and 20 percent of men consume the recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables a day.

Having a family history of cardiovascular disease can also be a risk factor. Remember, a risk factor is not the cause of a disease, but it is associated with its development. In the case of cardiovascular disease, you can help reduce your risk by maintaining or adopting healthy behaviors.

How Do I Prevent Cardiovascular Disease?

Adopting healthy behaviors can significantly reduce the risk of developing cardiovascular conditions:

- Avoid any form of tobacco use and secondhand smoke.
- Begin a regular program of physical activity.
- Consume healthy foods low in cholesterol and saturated fats.
- Cut down on daily salt and sodium intake.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables.

What Are the Signs and Symptoms of Cardiovascular Disease?

Symptoms vary depending on the extent to which the normal flow of blood to the affected organ is interrupted. When the interruption of blood supply to the brain or heart is severe, some or all of the following symptoms can be experienced:

Heart Attack:

- Central chest pain with oppressive or squeezing feeling that lasts for a few minutes.
- Chest pain that can spread to the neck, shoulders, and/or arms.
- Chest discomfort along with light-headedness, sweating, faintness, nausea, or shortness of breath.

Stroke:

- Weakness of arms or legs.
- Loss of feeling in the face or body.
- Difficulty in speaking.
- Sudden loss of vision in one eye.
- Dizziness and unsteady gait.
- A sudden intense headache.

Congestive Heart Failure:

- Swelling of lower extremities called “peripheral edema.”
- Intolerance to physical activity followed by shortness of breath, fatigue, and cough.

What Is the Treatment for Cardiovascular Disease?

Some conditions associated with cardiovascular disease such as cholesterol, high blood pressure, and obesity can be managed by combining medications with healthy behaviors.

More serious conditions associated with cardiovascular disease can be life threatening. These usually require in-patient care in the hospital. Early medical or surgical treatment can reduce mortality, improve quality of life, and limit the amount of the tissue damage.

Additional Resources

Alliance for Aging Research: <http://www.agingresearch.org>

American Heart Association

National Center: 1.800.242.8721, <http://www.americanheart.org>

MyHeart (for women): 1.888.MyHeart (1.888.694.3278), <http://www.women.americanheart.org>

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute Information Center: <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov>

National Institute on Aging Information Center: 1.800.222.2225, <http://www.nih.gov/nia>

National Women’s Health Network: <http://www.womenshealthnetwork.org>

National Alliance for Hispanic Health
1501 16th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-1401
<http://www.Hispanichealth.org>

