

Know Your Cardiovascular Risk Factors

By Dr. Deidre Macdonald
Naturopathic physician

Likely, someone you know has become ill or died from heart disease. It is the number one cause of death for both men and women. After menopause, women's risk of heart disease equals that of men, but more women die from their first heart attack or stroke than do men. The great tragedy of cardiovascular disease is that it is a silent disease that can hit people in the prime of their life, robbing them of quality of life, or causing early death. While heredity does play a part the predisposition to heart disease, biology is far from destiny. There is overwhelming evidence that you can control whether or not you develop heart disease and whether it progresses. It is never too late to make a difference. Knowledge is power. The more you understand about the risk factors for cardiovascular disease, the more you can take action to stop it in its tracks. There is ample scientific evidence showing that diet, exercise, supplements, relaxation and chelation therapy can all help prevent and treat heart disease. Conventional medicine has made strides to help those in acute crisis with heart attacks, but drugs and surgery are not the only answer for optimizing your health.

Taking stock of your risk factors may let you know how aggressive you need to be in your prevention program. Ask about your family history and the lifestyles of those family members who had heart attacks or strokes. Take a good hard look at your lifestyle; do you smoke, eat high fat food, carry extra weight or live with high stress? If so, then it is time to get real about the choices you are making and decide that living is your priority. It is very helpful to enlist the support of a naturopathic physician or another professional who can coach you through these hard life changes. I find that making real, lasting change requires a lot more than will power. It takes looking at what drives the old patterns and addictive behaviors. Don't be afraid to ask for help; your life depends on it.

Your naturopathic or medical doctor can be an important ally in your heart disease prevention program. I recommend having a thorough physical examination at least yearly to assess blood pressure and other signs of heart disease. I also recommend that my patients have a thorough set of blood work done yearly to monitor their health. Diabetes is a serious risk factor for cardiovascular problems so blood sugar levels should be watched carefully in anyone with a family history or risk factors for diabetes. High cholesterol is a well known risk factor for cardiovascular disease. The "bad" cholesterol (LDL) can serve as the raw material to clog the arteries. It damages the arteries, setting up a cascade of events that contribute to plaque build up known as atherosclerosis. Good cholesterol (HDL) actually binds to the bad cholesterol and transports it to the liver where it can be destroyed. Therefore, the proportion of good and bad cholesterol tells us more than just how much total cholesterol you have. The goal in lifestyle coaching is to increase the HDL and decrease the LDL, thus lowering the ratio. Foods and supplements that have been shown to influence these two types of cholesterol are as follows:

| Foods that improve cholesterol ratio | Foods that worsen cholesterol ratio |
|---|---|
| Beans | Saturated fats – meat, dairy and peanuts |
| Soy products | Trans fatty acids* |
| Oatmeal | Hydrogenated vegetable oil* |
| Garlic, onions | Vegetable oil shortening* |
| Salmon (omega 3 fatty acids) | Partially hydrogenated oils* |
| Olive oil (monounsaturated oil) | High sugar diets |
| Almonds (monounsaturated oil) | Ultra low fat diets |
| Avocados (monounsaturated oil) | |
| Citrus, peppers, broccoli (vitamin C) | * found in most packaged foods, especially crackers, cookies, baked foods, and margarine. |
| Green or black tea | |
| Apples, carrots (fiber called pectin) | |

If you have high levels of bad cholesterol, it is important to understand that cholesterol is a fat that can go rancid, just like unrefrigerated butter does. Rancid, or oxidized LDL cholesterol is highly destructive to the artery walls. You can prevent your LDL cholesterol from becoming oxidized by having a diet high in antioxidant nutrients. That is one of the reasons why eating lots of fruits and vegetables, and taking a daily antioxidant supplement makes so much sense. Lowering your intake of omega-6 type oils is also important as they become incorporated into LDL cholesterol particles where they are readily oxidized and become destructive. Omega-6 oils are corn oil, safflower oil, and soy oil.

Another well studied risk factor for cardiovascular disease is homocysteine. Scientists have shown a link between high levels of this amino acid and early development of cardiovascular disease, deep vein thrombosis and stroke. Interestingly, it has also been shown to be a risk factor for dementia and Alzheimer's disease. People with family history of these diseases should ask their medical or naturopathic physician about testing for this important risk factor. It can be easily treated by supplementing several B vitamins and cardiologists are now routinely recommending patients take folic acid, B5, B6 and B12.

The final piece of lab work that will help you understand if you are on the way to a cardiovascular event like heart attack or stroke, is called C-Reactive Protein. This factor in the blood has been well studied and is an indicator of the level of inflammation in the blood vessels. It is inflammation in the blood vessels that causes plaques to rupture, creating a log jam where platelets congregate and make clots that cause heart attacks and strokes. The predictive value of C Reactive Protein (CRP) as a risk factor for cardiovascular events has led some researchers to support the use of CRP as a main cardiovascular risk assessment tool.

If upon taking stock of your risk factors you determine that you need to get to work to change your fate, I encourage you to enlist the support of a health care coach like a naturopathic physician to get on the road to health. If you have heart disease, I often recommend a consultation with my colleague, Dr. Christoph Kind who performs chelation therapy. This intravenous therapy has an excellent track record of safety and efficacy in helping those with established heart disease. You can stop heart disease, and like my husband and I, take charge of your destiny with a holistic approach to health.