



Show your heart some love

A guide to understanding heart disease risk factors—
and learning ways to help your heart to better health

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Let's start at the heart of it

As the hardest-working muscle in your body, your heart is essential for just about everything that keeps your body healthy—from pumping blood to delivering oxygen and nutrients to your cells.

Getting smart about heart health may have long term benefits for your overall well-being. With help from this guide, you'll learn about common risks for heart disease, how to reduce those risks and steps to move you toward a heart-healthier lifestyle.

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A closer look at heart disease

Heart disease—also known as cardiovascular disease—is the top cause of death in the U.S.¹ It prevents the heart from pumping blood the way it should. That means blood may have trouble getting to the heart, lungs and other organs.

Common risk factors

Anyone can develop heart disease, but you may be at more at risk if you have certain health conditions. Take heart, though: Some risk factors can be controlled, and it may be possible to prevent, stabilize or even improve some of the causes of heart disease.



Diabetes

Diabetes and heart disease often go hand-in-hand—because, over time, high blood sugar levels can harm blood vessels and the nerves that control the heart. People with diabetes are 2 times more likely to have a heart attack or stroke.² Keeping blood sugar in a healthy range may help fend off some of that extra risk.



High blood pressure

High blood pressure can do damage throughout the body and may raise the risk of heart failure, kidney disease, blindness and more. One slightly above-normal reading may not be a problem. But when readings on 2 or more occasions are elevated, it may be a concern—and a signal for action.



High cholesterol

It's normal to have some cholesterol. But if levels aren't on target, the stage can be set for clogged arteries—and a heart attack or stroke. Having your cholesterol checked is a good way to know where you stand.



Overweight or obesity

Carrying around extra pounds may take a toll on the heart—and may raise the risk of heart disease. Losing even a modest amount of weight—5–7% of your weight—may help improve health.²



Physical inactivity

People who are inactive are nearly twice as likely to develop heart disease as those who are active.³ Aerobic exercise benefits the heart and lungs the most, but even modest amounts of physical activity are good for health. Generally speaking, most adults should aim for at least 2.5 hours a week of moderate aerobic physical activity*—such as taking a walk, raking the yard or swimming.



Smoking

Quitting smoking is one of the most important things people can do to reduce their risk for heart disease.⁴ People who smoke are 2 to 4 times more likely to develop heart disease than nonsmokers.⁵ The good news is that as soon as someone quits smoking, their risk begins to go down—and continues to decrease over time.⁴

*For safety's sake, talk with your doctor before significantly increasing your activity level.

Have a heart-to-heart with your primary doctor

Taking care of your heart is important to your overall health. A good way to learn about heart disease risk factors is by getting in touch with your primary doctor. A primary doctor may also be called a primary care provider (PCP). No matter the name, you can think of them as your heart health guide. They know your health history and health goals—and can help you learn ways to protect your heart's health.

Questions to start the convo

Here are some important heart-health questions you might ask your primary doctor at your next checkup:

“What should my blood pressure be? How often should it be checked?”

“What should my cholesterol and triglyceride levels be? How often should they be checked?”

“What’s a healthy weight for me?”

“Can you suggest any resources that could help me lose weight or stop smoking?”

“Should I be screened for diabetes? What should my blood sugar level be?”

“What lifestyle changes would you recommend for me?”

“How can I make sure I’m taking my prescription medications the right way? And what should I do if I’m having side effects?”

To find a network doctor:



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Get in on heart-healthy programs

Your health plan includes access to wellness programs and resources that are designed to help support healthier habits, a healthier heart and better overall health. What's more, they're available at no additional cost to you. You can also search for local services and programs that may offer free or reduced-cost medical care, food, housing, transportation and more on [Your Connection to Community Resources](#).



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*See Rally® for the full list of eligible rewards. Only available for employees and their spouses/partners enrolled in a MetLife medical plan option. Restrictions and program requirements must be met to receive an award. The dividend amount you earn in 2024 will be paid out in April 2025 as long as you are enrolled in a MetLife medical plan option and employed by MetLife on the date of the payout.

Tips for living healthier every day

It's never too late, or too early, to take steps to protect your heart by making heart-healthy choices. Here are a few tips to get started.



Tip 1: Eat smart

Making small yet simple changes to your diet may make a big difference. Stocking your pantry and fridge with the good things your heart deserves may help you eat healthier—and help lower your risk of heart disease. Focus on these 5 love-your-heart foods:

1 Fruits and veggies

For a wide range of nutrients, go for a colorful medley of fresh produce.

2 Whole grains

Select whole-grain breads, pastas, tortillas and cereals. Other options to embrace include brown rice, wild rice, bulgur, quinoa and oatmeal.

3 Lean proteins

Consider skinless poultry, seafood and lean cuts of other meats, such as round or loin. Some varieties of fish—such as salmon and trout—offer heart-friendly omega-3 fatty acids too.* And how about being ready with a few meatless protein choices? You might choose beans, tofu or unsalted nuts and seeds.

4 Low-fat dairy products

Go fat-free or low-fat when it comes to milk, cheese, yogurt and other dairy choices.

5 Healthy oils

Reach for unsaturated, heart-healthy vegetable oils, such as olive, canola, corn, safflower or sunflower.

Tip 2: Get active

Remember that something may be better than nothing, so try your best to incorporate physical activity into your routine every day. Here are 3 ways to get pumped about getting active:

1 Focus on fun

You're more likely to stick with activities you enjoy. So whether it's basketball, biking or walking laps around a mall, try to find fitness pursuits that make you happy.

2 Bring along a buddy

Ask a friend to join your heart-healthy mission—and cheer each other on. Meet for walks and talks. Or team up for a fun run.

3 Seize the moment

Throughout your day, find times to squeeze in short bursts of activity. Aim for at least 10 minutes at a time. Maybe that's a quick stroll around the block or a quick set of lunges between loads of laundry or conference calls.

*Certain people are encouraged to eat fish that is low in mercury. This includes women who are pregnant or may become pregnant, nursing mothers and young children. **Learn more** about mercury in fish.

Tip 3: Reduce stress

Some stress is unavoidable, but there are healthy ways to help manage it. Here are 3 techniques to try:

1 Be proactive

Declutter your day by crossing off any to-dos that aren't musts—or bump them to another day. If there's a stressful day coming up, plan ahead by packing a nutritious lunch and getting a good night's sleep.

2 Soothe stress when it strikes

Take a breather: Close your eyes and take slow, deep breaths to help yourself relax. Or try taking a quick stroll. It may ease tension in the moment.

3 Regroup and unwind

Kick back for a few minutes after a stressful day. Turn on a calming playlist—or just take a quiet moment to collect your thoughts. Another option? Talk with a supportive loved one or friend. It might help you feel better—and it might help you see challenges in new ways.



Keep in mind

Everyone may have “off” days, so it's good to remember that a healthier lifestyle is your goal for the long term.

Questions about heart health?



Your primary doctor can help guide you to answers. To find a network doctor, scan this code with your phone or sign in at myuhc.com and select **Find Care & Costs > Primary Care Providers**.

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¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Deaths and mortality. cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/deaths.htm. Last reviewed Jan. 17, 2023. Accessed June 12, 2023.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Your heart and diabetes. cdc.gov/diabetes/diabetes-complications/diabetes-and-your-heart.html. Accessed Aug. 20, 2024.

³ National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. Get regular physical activity. nhlbi.nih.gov/health/heart-healthy-living/physical-activity. Last updated March 24, 2022. Accessed June 12, 2023.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Benefits of quitting smoking. cdc.gov/tobacco/about/benefits-of-quitting.html. Accessed June 12, 2023.

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Health effects of cigarette smoking. cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/fact_sheets/health_effects/effects_cig_smoking/index.htm. Last reviewed Oct. 29, 2021. Accessed Aug. 20, 2024.

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