

# MAJOR RISK FACTORS FOR *heart* DISEASE

As important as it is to work closely with your doctor, it is only the first step. To make a lasting difference in your heart health, you'll also need to educate yourself about heart disease and about the kinds of habits and conditions that can raise your risk. It's your heart, and you're in charge. What follows is a basic guide to the most important risk factors for heart disease and how each of them affects a woman's health.

## **Smoking**

Cigarette smoking has been described as "the most important individual health risk in this country." Women who smoke are two to six times more likely to suffer a heart attack than nonsmoking women, and the risk increases with the number of cigarettes smoked each day. Smoking also boosts the risk of stroke. But heart disease and stroke are not the only health risks for women who smoke. Cigarette smoking greatly increases the chances that a woman will develop lung cancer. In fact, the lung cancer death rate for women is now higher than the death rate for breast cancer. Cigarette smoking is also linked with many other types of cancer, including cancers of the mouth, urinary tract, kidney, and cervix. Smoking also causes most cases of chronic obstructive lung disease, which includes bronchitis and emphysema. If you live or work with others, your "secondhand smoke" can also cause numerous health problems in those individuals. There is simply no safe way to smoke. Although low-tar and low nicotine cigarettes may reduce the lung cancer risk somewhat, they do not lessen the risks of heart disease or other smoking-related diseases. The only safe and healthful course is not to smoke at all. (For tips on how to quit, see "Kick the Smoking Habit" on page \_\_\_.)

## **High Blood Pressure**

High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, is another major risk factor for heart disease, kidney disease, and congestive heart failure. High blood pressure is also the most important risk factor for stroke. Even slightly high levels increase your risk for these conditions.

New research estimates that middle-aged Americans have a *90 percent chance* of eventually developing high blood pressure. High blood pressure is more common and more severe in African-American women than it is in white women. Your risk also goes up if you are overweight or have a family history of high blood pressure.

High blood pressure is often called the "silent killer" because it usually doesn't cause symptoms. As a result, many people pay little attention to their blood pressure until they become seriously ill. The good news is that you can take action to control or prevent high blood pressure, and thereby avoid many life-threatening disorders.

## **What is Blood Pressure?**

Blood pressure is the amount of force exerted by the blood against the walls of the arteries. Everyone has to have some blood pressure, so that blood can get to all of the body's organs. Usually, blood pressure is expressed as two numbers, such as 120/80, and is measured in millimeters of mercury (mm Hg). The first number is the systolic blood pressure, the force when the heart beats. The second number, or diastolic blood pressure, is the pressure that exists in the arteries between heartbeats. Because blood pressure changes often, your health care provider should check it on several different days before deciding whether your blood pressure is too high. Blood pressure is considered "high" when it stays above normal levels over a period of time.

# BLOOD PRESSURE: HOW *high* IS HIGH?

The higher number of either your systolic or your diastolic measurement determines your blood pressure category. For example, if your systolic number is 125 but your diastolic number is 88, your category is “high normal” blood pressure. (See below.)

	Systolic	Diastolic
Optimal (ideal) blood pressure	Less than 120	Less than 80
Normal blood pressure	120-129	80-84
High normal blood pressure	130-139	85-89
High blood pressure	140 or above	90 or above

## PREVENTING CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE

High blood pressure is the number one risk factor for congestive heart failure. Heart failure is a life-threatening condition in which the heart cannot pump enough blood to supply the body’s needs. Congestive heart failure occurs when excess fluid starts to leak into the lungs, causing tiredness, weakness, and breathing difficulties. To prevent congestive heart failure, and stroke as well, you must control your high blood pressure to below 140 over 90. If your blood pressure is higher than that, talk with your doctor about starting or adjusting medication, as well as making lifestyle changes. To avoid congestive heart failure, controlling your weight is also very important. Being even moderately overweight increases your risk of developing heart failure.

### **Understanding Risk**

But numbers don’t tell the whole story. For example, if you have “high normal” blood pressure, you are still at increased risk for a heart attack, stroke, or heart failure. Also, if your systolic blood pressure (first number) is 140 or higher, you are more likely to develop cardiovascular and kidney diseases even if your diastolic blood pressure (second number) is not too high. Starting around age 55, women are more likely to develop high systolic blood pressure. High systolic blood pressure is high blood pressure. If you have this condition, you will need to take steps to control it. High blood pressure can be controlled in two ways: by changing your lifestyle and by taking medication.

### **Changing Your Lifestyle**

If your blood pressure is not too high, you may be able to control it entirely by losing weight if you are overweight, getting regular physical activity, cutting down on alcohol, and changing your eating habits. A special eating plan called the “DASH” diet can help you lower your blood pressure. DASH stands for “Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension.” The DASH diet emphasizes fruits, vegetables, wholegrain foods, and lowfat dairy products. It is rich in magnesium, potassium and calcium, as well as protein and fiber. It’s low in saturated and total fat and cholesterol, and limits red meats, sweets, and sugar-containing beverages. If you follow the DASH diet and also consume less sodium, you are likely to reduce your blood pressure even more. Sodium is a substance that affects blood pressure. It is the main ingredient in salt and is found in many processed foods, such as soups, convenience meals, some breads and cereals, and salted snacks. For more on the DASH diet and how to make other changes that can lower and prevent high blood pressure, see the “Taking Control: section of this handbook.

### ***Taking Medication to Control High Blood Pressure***

If your blood pressure remains high even after you make changes in your living habits, your doctor will probably prescribe medicine. The lifestyle changes described above will help the medicine work more effectively. In fact, if you are successful with the changes you make in your daily habits, then you may be able to gradually reduce how much medication you take.

Taking medicine to lower your blood pressure can reduce your risk of stroke, heart attack, congestive heart failure, and kidney disease. If you take a drug and notice any uncomfortable side effects, ask your doctor about changing the dosage or switching to another type of medicine.

A recent study found diuretics (water pills) work better than newer drugs to treat hypertension and to prevent some forms of heart disease. If you're starting treatment for high blood pressure, try a diuretic first. If you need more than one drug, ask your doctor about making one a diuretic. And, if you're already on treatment, ask about switching to or adding a diuretic. Diuretics work for most people, but if you need a different drug other medications are very effective. So talk with your doctor about your total health needs.

A reminder: It is important to take blood pressure medication exactly as your doctor has prescribed it. Before you leave your physician's office, make sure you understand the amount of medicine you are supposed to take each day, the specific times of day you should be taking it, **expected effects and side-effects and when to call your doctor. Talk to your doctor about self-monitoring your blood pressure. Some of the newer digital blood pressure devices are more accurate. Self-monitoring can allow you to work more in partnership with your prescribing practitioner.**

## **STROKE: *know* THE WARNING SIGNS**

Stroke is a medical emergency. If you or someone you know has a stroke, it is important to recognize the symptoms so you can get to a hospital quickly. Getting treatment within 60 minutes can prevent disability. The chief warning signs of a stroke are:

- ♥ Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm, or leg (especially on one side of the body).
- ♥ Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding speech.
- ♥ Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes.
- ♥ Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination.
- ♥ Sudden severe headache with no known cause.

If you think someone might be having a stroke, call 9-1-1 immediately. Also, be sure that family members and others close to you know the warning signs of a stroke. Give them a copy of this list. Ask them to call 9-1-1 right away if you or someone else shows any signs of a stroke.