

# Risk Factors for Heart Disease

**H**eat disease, also called **cardiovascular disease**, is the leading cause of death in the United States, where more than 600 000 people die of heart diseases each year. The most common form of heart disease is **coronary heart disease** (CHD). This primarily involves blockages in one or more of the arteries that supply oxygen to the heart. Depending on their severity and location, these blockages may lead to a **myocardial infarction** (heart attack). Many factors contribute to the development of heart disease. Some are risk factors that can be treated with medical intervention. Several of the risk factors for heart disease can be prevented by lifestyle changes.

The May 27, 2009, issue of *JAMA* includes an article about cardiovascular disease risk factors among National Football League players.



## RISK FACTORS

- Smoking
- High blood pressure
- A high level of **low-density lipoprotein** (LDL; bad cholesterol) especially when associated with a low level of **high-density lipoprotein** (HDL; good cholesterol)
- High levels of **triglycerides** (another form of fat found in the bloodstream that can contribute to heart disease)
- Diabetes
- Overweight (body mass index [BMI] greater than 25) or obesity (BMI greater than 30)
- Excessive alcohol use
- Family history of premature death (before age 65) from heart disease

## PREVENTION

- Speak to your physician to learn whether you have risk factors and what you can do to modify them.
- If you smoke, quit. Your physician will be able to assist you with resources.
- Keep your blood pressure under control.
- Keep your blood **glucose** (sugar) under control.
- Include a variety of dark-colored vegetables and fruits in your diet every day, choose foods made with whole grains, choose lean meats or fish, and avoid excessive sugars and starches. Check food labels and avoid **saturated** (usually from animals) fats and foods made with **trans-fats** or **hydrogenated** fats.
- Keep physically fit and do some form of physical exercise most days of the week to keep your weight under control.
- If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation, meaning no more than 1 drink per day for women and 2 drinks per day for men.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute  
[www.nhlbi.nih.gov/chd](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/chd)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
[www.cdc.gov/heartdisease/about.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/heartdisease/about.htm)  
[www.cdc.gov/alcohol/quickstats/general\\_info.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/quickstats/general_info.htm)

## INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and other JAMA Patient Pages go to the Patient Page link on JAMA's Web site at [www.jama.com](http://www.jama.com). Many are available in English and Spanish. A Patient Page on smoking and the heart was published in the May 7, 2008, issue; one on alcohol and heart disease in the April 18, 2001, issue; and one on heart disease and women in the December 25, 2002, issue.

Sources: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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