

# Women and Heart Disease: Understanding the Risks

Risk factors are habits and conditions that make heart disease more likely. The more you have, the higher your chances of heart attack and other problems. Most risk factors can be managed to help make your heart healthier. Below are factors that increase your risk for having heart disease.

## Smoking

Smoking damages the lining of the blood vessels and raises blood pressure. Research shows that smoking makes women up to 6 times more likely to have a heart attack. This is the biggest of all the risk factors you can change.

## Diabetes

Diabetes causes high blood sugar, which can damage blood vessels if not kept under control. Having diabetes also makes you more likely to have a silent heart attack—one without any symptoms. **You're at risk if** your blood sugar level is above 100 mg/dL.

## Unhealthy Lipid Levels

Lipids are fatty substances in the blood. LDL cholesterol and triglycerides (both bad lipids) can build up in artery walls, narrowing the arteries. HDL cholesterol (a good lipid) helps clear bad lipids away. **You're at risk if you have:** HDL cholesterol under 50 mg/dL; LDL cholesterol over 100 mg/dL; triglycerides over 150 mg/dL.

## High Blood Pressure

High blood pressure occurs when blood pushes too hard against artery walls as it travels through the arteries. This damages the lining of the blood vessels. **You're at risk if** your blood pressure is above 120/80.

## Excess Weight

Excess weight makes your heart work harder. This raises your risk of a heart attack. Being overweight also puts you at risk of developing diabetes. Excess weight around the waist or stomach increases your risk the most. **You're at risk if** your BMI (body-mass index) is above 25.

## Lack of Exercise

Without regular exercise, you're more likely to develop other risk factors, such as being overweight and developing diabetes. High blood pressure and unhealthy lipid levels are also more likely.

## Negative Emotions

Emotions such as stress and pent-up anger have been linked to heart disease. Over time, these emotions could raise your heart disease risk. If you have heart disease, emotion such as anxiety and depression

can make it worse.

## **Metabolic Syndrome**

This is caused by a combination of certain risk factors. It puts you at extra high risk of heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. You have metabolic syndrome if you have three or more of the following: low HDL cholesterol; high triglycerides; high blood pressure; high blood sugar; extra weight around the waist.

## **Risks You Can't Control**

A few risk factors can't be changed. But they still raise your heart disease risk.

- **Family history.** If your mother or sister had heart trouble before age 65 or your father or brother before age 55, you're at higher risk of having a heart attack.
- **Age.** The older you are, the higher your heart disease risk.