

Coronary Heart Disease (CHD)

CHD is caused by a thickening of the inside walls of arteries that bring blood to the heart muscle. Cholesterol can build up inside the artery walls and narrow the space through which blood can flow. This decreases the supply of oxygen and nutrients to the heart.

Are You at Risk for CHD?

Chances for having CHD double with each risk factor a person has. These include:

- High blood cholesterol
- High blood pressure
- Smoking
- Obesity
- Physical inactivity
- Family history of CHD
- Diabetes

Symptoms and Screening

The most common symptoms for CHD include:

- Chest pain
- Shortness of breath
- Tightness, pressure, squeezing, or burning behind the breastbone, and/or in the arms, neck and jaw.

CHD differs from person to person, so diagnosis and treatment also differ. There is no single test for CHD. Health care providers use several tests to find out if a person has CHD. Some of these tests include:

- Electrocardiogram (ECG)
- Stress test

Prevention and Treatment

Once CHD develops, it requires lifelong care. For most people, this means lifestyle changes and medication. More serious cases of CHD may require surgery. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle remains the best way to stop CHD from progressing. Some of these healthy choices include:

- Eating a diet low in fat and cholesterol
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Getting regular physical activity and exercise
- Quitting smoking

What is Cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a natural fat produced by all animals. In humans, the liver produces cholesterol that helps our bodies build cells and produce hormones. We also take extra cholesterol into our bodies when we eat foods such as meat, eggs, and dairy products. Too much cholesterol can clog our arteries and block nutrients and oxygen from reaching the heart.

There are two types of cholesterol. HDL (high-density lipoprotein) or "good cholesterol" is easy for our bodies to break down and process. LDL (low-density lipoprotein) or "bad cholesterol" remains in the body and is associated with coronary heart disease.

A total blood cholesterol level that is less than or equal to 200 mg/dL is healthy. It puts a person at low risk for CHD. A blood cholesterol level of 240 mg/dL is high. A health care provider can check the levels of "good" (HDL) and "bad" (LDL) cholesterol in the blood. A high LDL level and/or a low HDL level puts a person at a greater risk for heart disease. A well-balanced diet that is low fat is important for keeping cholesterol at healthy levels.

Adults should have their blood cholesterol levels checked at least once every five years. You can be screened for cholesterol levels during a visit to your health care provider.

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