

Risk factors are traits and lifestyle habits that increase your risk of disease. The same factors that raise your risk of coronary heart disease, which causes heart attack, also directly or indirectly raise your risk of stroke. Several factors only increase stroke risk.

The more risk factors you have, the higher your chances of having a heart attack or stroke. Some risk factors you can control, treat or prevent. They are:

- High blood pressure, or hypertension
- Smoking
- High blood cholesterol
- Physical inactivity
- Obesity
- Diabetes

Other risk factors you can't control. They are:

- Increasing age
- Sex (gender)
- Race
- Family medical history
- Previous heart attack or stroke

Still other factors may affect your risk of heart attack and stroke. They include unhealthy responses to stress, excessive alcohol and some illegal drugs. To cut your risk, the American Heart Association suggests the following:

- **Don't smoke cigarettes or other tobacco products.** Avoiding tobacco smoke is the best thing you can do to maintain your health. In fact, tobacco smoke is the single most preventable cause of death in the United States.
- **Have your blood pressure checked regularly.** You have high blood pressure if two or more of your readings are 140/90 mm Hg or higher. High blood pressure makes your heart work harder. This puts more strain on the heart and arteries.
- **Read labels to make sure you eat foods low in saturated fats and cholesterol.** Limit your saturated fat intake to 8 to 10 percent of total calories or less. Get your cholesterol level checked once every five years, starting at age 20.
- **Stay physically active.** Thirty to 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity on most days of the week is all it takes to help your heart.
- **Maintain proper weight.** If you have too much fat, especially in the waist, you have a higher risk for health problems such as heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol and diabetes.
- **Have regular medical check-ups.** Follow your doctor's advice to reduce your risk of heart attack and stroke.