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Is hypertension a risk?

Hypertension (blood pressure over 140/90 or higher) causes damage to arterial walls and increases the formation of blood clots. High blood pressure is not only a risk factor for cardiovascular disease, but also cerebrovascular disease and the primary cause of atherosclerosis (clogged arteries). High blood pressure is easily diagnosed and can be treated with medication.

What about smoking?

Smoking can increase heart rate, increase blood pressure and increase the hardening of the arterial walls. Quitting smoking for five years can reduce the risk of coronary heart disease by 40 percent.

Does diabetes increase my risk?

Poorly controlled blood sugar levels cause the blood level of fatty substances to rise, leading to accelerated atherosclerosis. With diabetes mellitus, cells can't get sugar into them, making the heart work harder to get glucose into the cells. Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death of people who have diabetes.

I'm confused about cholesterol levels. Do they increase my risk for heart disease?

Cholesterol is one of the major fats in the blood. Fat cells insulate the body from cold and protect it from injury; however, a high amount of fat can lead to problems. Researchers have distinguished between "good" cholesterol (high-density lipoproteins, or HDL) and "bad" cholesterol (low-density lipoprotein, or LDL). Normally, the body uses a certain amount of LDL, and the rest circulates in the bloodstream. An excess of LDL cholesterol can build up in the walls of arteries over time, clogging arteries leading to the heart. A change to a low cholesterol diet along with some medications can reduce the effect of high cholesterol.

How important is diet and exercise?

Obesity forces the cardiovascular system to work harder. Obesity is often associated with high blood pressure and high cholesterol levels. The reduction of weight by proper diet and exercise can lower the risk of cardiovascular disease. Although physical inactivity itself does not cause heart disease, it may lead to other conditions detrimental to cardiovascular health, such as increased cholesterol levels.