



# Are you at risk for heart disease or stroke?

**Take action and reduce your risk**



**Nine in 10** Canadians have at least one risk factor for heart disease and stroke. The more risk factors you have, the greater your risk.



The **good news is that almost 80%** of premature heart disease and stroke can be **prevented through healthy lifestyle habits.**



Knowing your own risk factors is the first step to help prevent disease.

**1**

**Assess your risk**

**2**

**Learn how to  
reduce your risk**

**3**

**Take action**

Step One

# **Assess your risk**

## Check the risk factors that apply to you.

### Medical conditions

- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol levels
- Diabetes
- Atrial fibrillation (an irregular heart rhythm)
- Pre-eclampsia (high blood pressure during pregnancy)
- Sleep apnea (a condition that causes you to stop and start breathing while you sleep)\*

### Lifestyle risk factors

- Unhealthy diet
- Not enough exercise
- Unhealthy weight
- I smoke or chew tobacco
- I am a heavy drinker (or binge drinker)
- I am stressed
- Recreational drug use
- I use birth control or hormone replacement therapy

### Risk factors you cannot control

- Male, over the age of 55
- Female, after menopause\*\*
- South Asian or African heritage
- Indigenous heritage
- Family history\*\*\* of heart disease or stroke/TIA (transient ischemic attack)

\* Current research evidence indicates that available treatments for sleep apnea are not effective at reducing the risk for stroke caused by this condition. Therefore we are not able to recommend actions at this time.

\*\* When you are past menopause less estrogen is produced. Hormones such as estrogen have an impact on your risk of heart disease and stroke. Heart disease can also present and progress in different ways depending on whether you are male or female.

\*\*\* Family history includes: parents, sibling or children.

Step Two

**Learn how  
to reduce  
your risk**


# Manage your medical conditions

## Control high blood pressure

High blood pressure is the number one risk factor for **stroke** and a major risk factor for **heart disease**.

You cannot feel or notice high blood pressure. The only way to know if you have high blood pressure is to measure it.

### Take Action

- Ask your doctor for your target blood pressure level. Check it regularly.
- Eat a healthy balanced diet, with lots of vegetables and fruit.
  - Use less salt in cooking, baking and at the table. 
  - Cut down on processed foods.
- Try to stay at a healthy weight.
- Be more active.
- Be smoke free.
- Manage stress.
- Take medication, if prescribed by your doctor.

## Shake the salt habit

About 80% of the salt we consume comes from processed foods, including fast foods, prepared meals, processed meats such as hot dogs and lunch meats, canned soups, bottled dressings, packaged sauces, condiments such as ketchup and pickles, and salty snacks like potato chips.

### Tips on how to reduce your salt intake:

- Cut down on prepared and processed foods.
- Look for products with claims such as low sodium, sodium reduced or no salt added.
- Eat more fresh or frozen vegetables and fruit.
- Reduce the amount of salt you add while cooking, baking or at the table.
- Experiment with other seasonings, such as garlic, lemon juice and fresh or dried herbs.
- When eating out, ask for nutrient information for the menu items and select meals lower in sodium.
- Learn about the DASH Diet. (**D**ietary **A**pproaches to **S**top **H**ypertension)

## Improve cholesterol levels

High blood cholesterol is one of the major controllable risk factors for heart disease and stroke. As your blood cholesterol rises, so does your risk of coronary heart disease.

High blood cholesterol can be inherited, caused by an unhealthy diet or both.

### Take Action

- Eat a healthy balanced diet, with lots of vegetables and fruit.  
(see page 11 for tips)
- Be more active.
- Take medication, if prescribed by your doctor.





## Control diabetes

People with diabetes have twice the risk of stroke and heart attack as someone without diabetes.

### Take Action

- Make healthy choices — eat healthy, stay active, limit alcohol and stop smoking.
- Check your blood sugar levels regularly.
- Talk to your doctor or diabetes educator about how to manage your diabetes.

## Manage atrial fibrillation (Afib)

Afib is an irregular heart rhythm. It increases the risk of stroke by three to five times.

### Take Action

- Afib often requires medication or other treatments. Your doctor will provide you with information about treatment options.
- Make healthy choices — eat healthy, stay active, limit alcohol and stop smoking.
- Try to stay at a healthy weight.

## Pre-eclampsia

Women who have had pre-eclampsia during pregnancy have an increased risk of high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke later in life.

### Take Action

- Women with pre-eclampsia should be screened and treated for high blood pressure, obesity, smoking and high blood cholesterol during and after pregnancy.

# Make lifestyle changes to improve your health

## Eat healthy

You can improve your heart and brain health by eating a healthy balanced diet.

### Take Action

- Eat a healthy balanced diet, with lots of vegetables and fruit.
  - Choose brightly coloured fruits and vegetables each day, especially orange and dark green vegetables.
  - Frozen or canned unsweetened fruits and vegetables are a good alternative to fresh produce.
- Prepare meals at home from scratch. Cooking at home allows you to select whole and minimally processed foods, and to limit added salt.
- Keep a reusable water bottle with you so that you can fill it up wherever you are going. Communities that do not have access to safe drinking water can stay hydrated with non-sweetened drinks such as coffee, tea or boiled water.

For more tips on healthy eating and reducing salt in your diet see opposite and page 7.



# What is a **healthy balanced** diet?

## Have More Often:

- Vegetables and fruit. Aim for 7–10 servings of vegetables and fruit every day.
- Whole grain foods.
- A variety of foods that provide protein, such as fish, beans and lentils.

## Have Less Often:

- Processed foods
- Sugary drinks



For more on healthy eating basics visit: [heartandstroke.ca/healthyeating](http://heartandstroke.ca/healthyeating)

For tips on reducing salt in your diet see page 7.

## **Processed** food

- Eating fewer processed foods is one of the best things you can do to achieve a healthier diet.
- Processed foods are foods that have been changed from their original food source.
  - Many ingredients are added such as salt and sugar.
  - Nutrients such as vitamins, minerals and fibre are often removed.
  - Examples are: hot dogs, chips, cookies, deli meats, white rice and white bread, pre-packaged and ready-to-eat meals such as frozen pizza or chicken nuggets; fast or take out meals.
- Some processed foods are “highly processed” and some are “minimally processed”. We need to be concerned about foods that are highly processed like the foods in the examples.
- Minimally processed foods are foods that are only slightly changed.
  - They contain few additives.
  - Most nutrients are retained.
  - Examples are: bagged salad, frozen vegetables, milk, cheese, flour, brown rice, oil and dried herbs.
- When trying to eat fewer processed foods, focus on the more highly processed foods. Don’t worry about foods that are minimally processed.
- The key is to eat more foods in their natural form.



## Be more active

Being physically active is good for your heart and brain. Getting 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous-intensity activity per week reduces the risk of heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure and diabetes by 30%. People who are NOT active have an increased risk of heart disease and stroke, as well as an increased risk of diabetes, cancer and dementia. Being active helps your heart, brain, muscles, bones and mood.

### Take Action

- Try to be active every day.
  - Aim for 30 minutes of physical activity most days of the week, in sessions of 10 minutes or more.
  - Include moderate exercise (cycling, brisk walking, jogging) in the mix.
- Walking is a great way to start.
- Look for opportunities to be active every day. Play outside with the kids, rake leaves, take the stairs...it is all good!
- Start slowly, set weekly goals and increase your level of activity over time.



**NOTE:** Before starting a physical activity program, speak to your healthcare provider first to discuss what is right for you.

## Aim for a healthy weight

Being overweight can lead to high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes and sleep apnea. Even a small weight loss will help.

### Take Action

- Your doctor will help you figure out the weight that is right for you.
- The best way to lose weight is to choose healthy foods and be more active.
- Make small changes in your diet and activity levels that you can keep for life. That's better than making lots of changes at once and not sticking to any of them.



## Kick the smoking habit

Smokers have more than twice the risk for heart attack. Smoking triples the risk of dying from heart disease and stroke in middle-aged men and women. Quitting is one of the most important things you can do to prevent heart disease and stroke.

### Take Action

- If you want to quit, it is important to have a good plan and support in place.
- Learn how to make a good quit plan. Call Smokers Helpline 1-866-366-3667 for free advice and support.
- Talk to your doctor about whether nicotine replacement therapy or medication is right for you.



## Drink less alcohol

Heavy drinking and binge drinking are risk factors for heart disease and stroke. Plus, alcohol may cause problems by interacting with your medications.

### Take Action

- If you drink alcohol, drink in moderation. That means limiting yourself to no more than:
  - two drinks a day most days, to a weekly maximum of 10 for women.
  - three drinks a day most days, to a weekly maximum of 15 for men.



### “A drink” means:

- **341 mL / 12 oz (1 bottle) of beer, cider or cooler** (5% alcohol).
- **142 mL / 5 oz wine** (12% alcohol).
- **43 mL / 1 1/2 oz spirits** (40% alcohol).

Do not drink when you are driving a vehicle, taking medications or other drugs that interact with alcohol, pregnant or are planning to be pregnant, making important decisions, doing any kind of dangerous physical activity, living with alcohol dependence or mental or physical health problems, or responsible for the safety of others. If you are concerned about how drinking may affect your health, talk to your doctor.

## Birth control and hormone replacement therapy

For some women, birth control pills increase their risk of high blood pressure and blood clots. The risk is greater if you:

- smoke
- have high blood pressure
- have a blood clotting problem
- are over 40
- have other risk factors for heart disease or stroke

Women who are taking estrogen as part of HRT (hormone replacement therapy) have an increased risk of stroke and heart attack.

### Take Action

- If you use hormonal contraceptives or HRT, discuss your risks with your doctor.

## Avoid recreational drug use

Stroke risk is at least 5 times higher in drug users than in non-users. When a stroke occurs, it often happens within hours of drug use. Drugs such as amphetamines, cannabis (marijuana), cocaine, ecstasy, heroin or opiates, LSD and PCP increase the risk of having a stroke and developing heart disease.

### Take Action

- Talk to your doctor about your options to live free of recreational drugs.

## Manage stress

Stress can cause the heart to work harder, increases blood pressure and increases your risk.

### Take Action

- Know what causes you stress.
- Talk to people you trust.
- Take a short break away from your regular routine.
- Plan some physical activity into your day.
- Try mindfulness meditation or deep breathing to help you relax.
- Do activities you enjoy. Have some fun!



Step Three

**Take  
action**



# Make changes for a healthier life

- Plan to make healthy lifestyle changes that include realistic goals — like walking for 10 minutes, 5 days a week. Ask yourself how confident you are about reaching the goal. If you don't feel confident, change the goal to one you can reach.
- Act on your goals — take one step at a time.
- Figure out what's stopping you from sticking to your plan. Keep a record of your daily food intake and physical activity to help you identify barriers and inspire you to reach your goals.
- Don't give up — get back on track when you slip up.
- Reward yourself for the gains you've made — with something you like to do, not food.

## The changes I am going to make are:

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**We can help with tips and advice  
for how to make healthy changes.**

Whether it is information on a condition like high blood pressure or atrial fibrillation, or information on healthy eating and getting active, **we can help.**

**Call us**

**1-888-473-4636**

**or visit**

**[heartandstroke.ca](http://heartandstroke.ca)**

**Try the Heart&Stroke Risk Assessment  
to assess your risk and get a  
personalized plan**

**[heartandstroke.ca/riskassessment](http://heartandstroke.ca/riskassessment)**

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