



# To Your HEALTH

WELCOA'S ONLINE GENERAL WELLNESS BULLETIN

## To Your Heart Health

February is American Heart Month—a time to reflect on the sobering fact that heart disease remains the number one killer of both women and men in the United States. The good news is you have the power to protect and improve your heart health.

### Know Your Risks, Protect Your Heart

Research has found that you can lower your risk for heart disease simply by adopting sensible health habits. To protect your heart, the first step is to learn your own personal risk factors for heart disease. Risk factors are conditions or habits that make you more likely to develop a disease. Risk factors can also increase the chances that an existing disease will get worse.

Certain risk factors—like getting older or having a family history of heart disease—can't be changed. But you do have control over some important risk factors such as:

- ♥ High blood cholesterol
- ♥ Excess weight
- ♥ High blood pressure
- ♥ Diabetes
- ♥ Smoking
- ♥ Physical inactivity

Many people have more than one risk factor. To safeguard your heart, it's best to lower or eliminate as many as you can because they tend to "gang up" and worsen each other's effects.

Scientists have found that middle-aged adults with one or more elevated risk factors, such as high blood pressure, were much more likely to have a heart attack or other major heart-related event during their remaining lifetime than people with optimal levels of risk factors.

To tackle your heart risk factors, it helps to know your numbers. Ask your health care provider to measure your blood cholesterol and blood pressure. Then determine if your weight is in the healthy range.

### Focus on the Risk Factors:

#### High Cholesterol

The higher your cholesterol level, the greater your risk for heart disease or heart attack. High blood cholesterol itself doesn't cause symptoms, so you can't know if your cholesterol is too high unless you have it tested. Routine blood tests can show your overall cholesterol level and separate levels of LDL ("bad") cholesterol, HDL ("good") cholesterol and triglycerides. All of these blood measurements are linked to your heart health.

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### Your Heart Health Is In Your Hands

#### High Blood Pressure

High blood pressure (hypertension) is another major risk factor for heart disease, as well as for stroke. High blood pressure is often called the “silent killer” because, like high cholesterol, it usually has no symptoms. Blood pressure is always reported as two numbers, and any numbers above 120/80 mmHg raise your risk of heart disease and stroke.

#### Excessive Weight

Your weight is another important number to know. To find out if you need to lose weight to reduce your risk of heart disease, you'll need to calculate your body mass index (BMI, a ratio of weight to height). A BMI between 25 and 29.9 means that you're overweight, while a BMI of 30 or higher means obesity. Next, take out a tape measure. A waist measurement of more than 35 inches for women and 40 inches for men raises the risk of heart disease and other serious health conditions. Fortunately, even a small weight loss (between 5% and 10% of your current weight) can help lower your risk.

A heart-healthy diet includes a variety of fruits, vegetables and whole grains, as well as lean meats, poultry, fish, beans and fat-free or low-fat dairy products. Try to avoid saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, sodium (salt) and added sugar.

#### Physical Inactivity

Regular physical activity is another powerful way to reduce your risk of heart-related problems and enjoy a host of other health benefits. To make physical activity a pleasure rather than a chore, choose activities you enjoy. Take a brisk walk, play ball, lift light weights, dance or garden. Even taking the stairs instead of an elevator can make a difference.



### Protect Your Heart

- ♥ Don't smoke.
- ♥ Maintain healthy cholesterol levels and blood pressure.
- ♥ Maintain a healthy weight.
- ♥ Choose more heart-healthy foods.
- ♥ Get and stay active.
- ♥ Know your family history.
- ♥ Learn the signs that something's wrong.

