

Diabetes and Heart Disease

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description **Learn about the connection between diabetes and heart disease.**

Diabetes and Heart Disease

What does diabetes have to do with heart disease?

People who have diabetes are more likely to get heart disease. When you have diabetes, your blood sugar level is often much higher than it should be. Too much sugar in the blood can cause damage to many parts of the body, including blood vessels. Some lifestyle habits may also raise the risk of heart disease. Here are some things you can do to lower your risk:

1. Keep your blood sugar level under control.

[Controlling your blood sugar level](#) will lower your risk of heart disease. Many people who have diabetes check their blood sugar level every day to make sure that their medicines and/or insulin, diet and exercise are working to keep their blood sugar in a normal range.

2. Lose weight--and keep it off.

Diabetes, being overweight and heart disease often go together. Losing weight helps a lot of health problems. For example, if you have been told that your blood pressure is too high, losing weight can bring it down. If your blood sugar level has been hard to control, losing

weight can help.

Weight loss is important if you have a lot of extra weight around your waist and abdominal area. People who tend to carry extra weight around their waist are more at risk for heart disease than people who have extra weight in the hips or thighs.

You don't have to lose a huge amount of weight to lower your risk for heart disease. Losing even 10 pounds can help.

3. Lower your cholesterol level.

[Cholesterol](#) is a waxy substance your body uses to protect nerves, make cell tissues and produce certain hormones. All the cholesterol your body needs is made by your liver. Cholesterol in the food you eat (such as eggs, meats and dairy products) is extra. Too much cholesterol in your blood can clog your arteries.

You've probably heard about "good" and "bad" cholesterol. "Bad," or LDL (which stands for low-density lipoprotein), cholesterol can clog your arteries and lead to heart disease. "Good," or HDL (which stands for high-density lipoprotein), cholesterol carries unneeded cholesterol away from body tissues. This lowers your risk of heart disease.

If your doctor says your cholesterol level is too high, what can you do about it? It helps to [lose weight](#) and [eat a healthy diet](#).

You should limit the amount of fatty and cholesterol-rich foods you eat. There are many cookbooks available that contain low-fat, low-cholesterol recipes and meal suggestions. If you need help figuring out how to change your diet, your doctor might refer you to a dietitian. A dietitian has special training in planning healthy diets.

If diet alone doesn't lower your cholesterol, [cholesterol-lowering medicines](#) can help do that. You and your doctor can talk about these medicines. The medicine that is best for you depends on your special needs and medical condition.

4. Increase your physical activity.

Along with diet, exercise is very important for people who have diabetes. Diet and exercise work together to help your body work properly. If you have changed your diet to lose weight,

exercising can help you lose weight faster.

You and your doctor can plan exercises that will work best for you and be safe. You don't need a gym or expensive equipment to get good exercise. Brisk walking is great exercise. Climbing stairs instead of taking an elevator is another good thing to do.

Like eating a healthy diet, exercise will also help keep your blood sugar level normal and can lower your risk of heart disease.

5. Control your blood pressure.

People who have diabetes often also have [high blood pressure](#). High blood pressure is a big risk factor for stroke. It also increases your risk for heart disease and kidney disease.

The same lifestyle changes that control blood sugar levels and lower your risk of heart disease may also keep your blood pressure at safe levels. Weight loss and exercise are important. The more weight you lose, the more you lower your blood pressure. It is also important not to drink very much alcohol.

If your blood pressure doesn't come down enough with diet and exercise, your doctor might have you take medicines that will help.

6. If you smoke, stop smoking.

[Smoking](#) is bad for everyone, but it's even worse for people who have diabetes because it damages the blood vessels. If you have diabetes and you also smoke, you double your risk of getting heart disease. Worse still, if you keep smoking while you try to reduce other risks (such as losing extra weight), you won't be able to exercise as much and you probably won't lose the weight you need to.

Remember:

Diabetes and heart disease are related. Diabetes, being overweight and having high blood pressure are related. Diet and exercise are good ways to control your blood sugar level, lower your blood pressure and cut your risk of getting heart disease. When diet and exercise don't help enough, medicines can help control blood sugar levels, lower cholesterol levels and

control blood pressure. You can do a lot to help by your own efforts.

Where can I get more information?

The American Diabetes Association can help you choose the right foods, plan healthy meals and get good nutrition while keeping your calories down.

The American Heart Association is a good source for diets that are low in fat and cholesterol.

Attenuating Cardiovascular Risk Factors in Patients with Type 2 Diabetes by Alan J. Garber, M.D., PH.D (12/15/00, <http://www.aafp.org/afp/20001215/2633.html>)