



Cardiac Risk Factors

Risk factors are the known contributing factors that increase a person's risk of developing cardiovascular disease (CVD), which includes coronary heart disease (CHD/CAD).

There are two different types of risk factors:

1. **Non-modifiable** we can't change these but it is important to be aware of them when determining our individual risk of heart disease.
2. **Modifiable** these are affected by our diet and lifestyle and can be changed or managed, resulting in a reduced risk of heart disease.

Non-modifiable risk factors include:

Age: if you are above the age of 65 you are at a much higher risk of being affected by cardiovascular disease. The risk of developing heart disease starts to increase in Indigenous populations for males above 35 and females above 45, much sooner than the general population.

Heart disease is a progressive disease, with plaque building up over time, causing arteries to become narrower. This results in heart conditions, including angina and heart attack.

Other factors that increase with aging include stiffening of the arteries, or arteriosclerosis. This can cause high blood pressure or hypertension. These can contribute to heart complications, including heart failure.

Gender: the main difference is that men tend to develop CVD at a younger age compared to pre-menopausal women. Women may also present with less common symptoms, potentially delaying their diagnosis. However, the risk of heart disease in men and women post menopause or from about 65yrs old, is similar, as the protective effects of oestrogen in women decreases.

Family history: if an immediate relative (e.g. father, mother or siblings) has a heart attack before 55yrs (men) or 65yrs old (women), you are at a greater risk of developing CHD. If both your parents had CHD before they were 55yrs old you have up to double the risk of developing CHD compared to other people. There are also genetic factors involved in developing other conditions such as high blood pressure, abnormal blood lipids and diabetes. These are all risk factors for developing CVD.

Ethnic Background: ethnicity can also predict our risk of heart disease. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people as well as people from regions of the Indian sub-continent have an increased risk of heart disease.

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Modifiable risk factors include:

Cholesterol & triglycerides (lipids): you need to know what targets or levels your doctor or specialist wants you to achieve. A combination of medications, diet and lifestyle factors may be needed. Talk with a health professional about which options are best for you, depending on your current lipid levels and any other health conditions.

If you commence or have changes made to your cholesterol medications, or you make significant lifestyle changes, you should have your cholesterol check four weeks post these changes. When you are diagnosed with CVD, especially if you have elevated cholesterol (LDLs) and triglyceride levels, they should be checked every 6 months.

Blood pressure: blood pressure should be monitored regularly (up to daily) by yourself and your doctor. Blood pressure levels less than 130/80mmHg can decrease your risk of developing complications such as heart attack and stroke significantly. If your blood pressure is consistently staying above 130/80mmHg talk to your doctor about how to decrease it.

Medications for blood pressure need to be taken daily to remain effective. Once your target blood pressure has been achieved, medications are still required to keep it at this level.

Refer to “Blood pressure” and “Salt- Sodium and Blood Pressure” information sheets.

Smoking: smoking has adverse effects on your arteries which can lead to development of heart disease, as well as many other conditions. It is recommended to decrease smoking, with the overall goal of being smoke free. Remember to also avoid passive smoking as this has been shown to also have similar negative effects on your health.

Diabetes: metabolic changes related to diabetes can contribute to the damage to heart arteries and also the build up of plaque. It is important to be checked to see if you have diabetes so you can control your blood sugar levels properly and minimise these effects on your body. If you are already diagnosed with diabetes good management can decrease your risk of complications. Talk to a cardiac or diabetes nurse educator for more information.

Physical activity: are you achieving the current recommendations for physical activity? To improve your heart health aim to be active every day for at least 30-60 minutes of moderate activity. Speak to a health professional for assistance, or refer to our exercise guideline sheets.

Emotional wellbeing: depression and social isolation are known to increase heart disease risk and impact your recovery after a heart event. By recognising and understanding how to manage your mental health better, the impacts on your overall health, including your heart, will decrease.

Weight and Waist: Excess weight around your waist increases your risk of developing CVD and diabetes. How to measure your waist? Feel for the last rib and the top of your hip bone and find the middle between the two points and measure around your waist there. Check what the ideal measurement based on your gender. Aim for a number (weight/waist) to achieve each month that is realistic and sustainable over the longer term.

Please see the following table of the modifiable risk factors & targets for heart disease

Risk Factor	What is the target? *	How often to check
Lipids Total cholesterol LDL-cholesterol Triglycerides HDL-cholesterol	Less than 4mmol/l Less than 1.8mmol/l Less than 2.0mmol/l More than 1.0mmol/l	At target – every 6 months Not at target – 4 weeks post medication or lifestyle change
Blood Pressure	Less than 130/80mmHg	Daily or as recommended by your health care professional
Smoking	Decrease and/or aim to quit	Daily
Diabetes	HbA1c less than 7% ("controlled" diabetes) HbA1c less than 6% (no history of diabetes)	If diagnosed with diabetes: Every 3 months If not diagnosed with diabetes: every year or as recommended by your doctor
Physical Activity	Regular, moderate physical activity 30 mins or more on most days of the week.	Daily
Depression, anxiety and social isolation	Should be manageable or treated	Daily
Weight and Waist	BMI 18.5 to 24.9 Waist men – less than 94cm Waist women – less than 80cm	Monthly
Alcohol	No more than 2 standard drinks per day With two alcohol free days	Daily

*These targets can vary depending on your history and other health issues so always talk to a health professional about what your individual targets are. These are general guidelines based on the current information available from a range of sources including National Heart Foundation of Australia (2020).