

How healthy is your heart?



Heart disease is the leading cause of death worldwide, with an estimated 17 million deaths every year. While some cases of heart disease are unavoidable, there are a large number of these deaths that are preventable. Therefore, it is very important to know the risk factors for the condition.

What are the risk factors for heart disease?

These are the risk factors that can't be changed, for example:

- **Age:** As you get older, your risk of heart disease increases because there is an increased risk of damaged and narrowed arteries, and a weakened or thickened heart muscle.
- **Gender:** Men are more likely to develop heart disease, however a woman's risk of heart disease increases significantly after menopause.
- **Family history:** The risk of developing heart disease is greater if you have a family history of heart disease, especially if an immediate family member developed heart disease at a young age.

There are also certain modifiable risk factors that can be controlled by making lifestyle changes:

- **Smoking:** Smokers are twice as likely to develop heart disease as non-smokers. Smoking damages the lining of the blood vessels and results in a build-up of fatty tissue in the arteries, which can cause atherosclerosis. The carbon monoxide from the cigarettes also

decreases the amount of oxygen in the blood, increasing the likelihood of developing a heart condition. Passive or secondhand smokers are also at an increased risk of developing heart disease.

- **Hypertension:** High blood pressure can cause hardening and thickening of the walls of the arteries, which can lead to heart disease.
- **Obesity:** Obese individuals are predisposed to heart disease through an increased risk of diabetes and elevated cholesterol.
- **Diet:** Research reveals that diets rich in refined sugars, saturated fats, trans fats, salt, and cholesterol can increase your risk of heart disease.
- **High cholesterol:** High cholesterol levels can increase your risk of developing heart disease. Your total cholesterol should be below 200 mg/dl, with HDL (good cholesterol) higher than 40 mg/dl in men and 50 mg/dl in women, and LDL (bad cholesterol) levels lower than 130 mg/dl in all adults.

Your risk for developing heart disease can be greatly reduced by quitting smoking, eating healthily, maintaining a good weight, and decreasing your cholesterol and blood pressure if needs be.