

- Cardiovascular system

UNDERSTANDING THE FOUR PILLARS OF CARDIOVASCULAR HEALTH

The Midweek Sun · 11 Oct 2023 · 27 · BY SUN REPORTER

Cardiovascular health, encompassing the well-being of the heart and blood vessels, stands as a critical aspect of overall health. Cardiovascular diseases (CVDs), such as coronary heart disease, stroke, and rheumatic heart disease, pose a significant global health challenge. The World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that these conditions claim approximately 17.9 million lives each year, making them the leading cause of mortality worldwide. To gauge and maintain cardiovascular health effectively, experts rely on four key health measurements: body-mass index (BMI), blood sugar levels, blood pressure, and cholesterol levels. These serve as foundational elements for heart health, and understanding their interaction is essential for individuals, particularly those aged 40 and above, to preserve their well-being.

General Practitioner, Dr Olekantse Kakabe emphasizes the interconnectedness of these four crucial factors in maintaining cardiovascular health. He states, “These four make the basic blood control components since BMI, cholesterol, blood pressure, and sugar all have to do with the heart, the most vital organ in the body. They also happen to be the main body suppressors because when any of them is not in check, there is a real risk of conditions such as heart attacks, strokes, and so on.”

BMI (Body Mass Index): BMI measures an individual’s weight in kilograms divided by the square of their height in meters. It is a fundamental indicator of body composition, categorizing individuals as underweight, healthy weight, overweight, or obese.

“Whatever the outcome of your measurement, it all begins with nutrition. If you are underweight, you have to eat better and gain some weight and if you are overweight, you have to eat better and lose some weight,” Dr Kakabe says, adding that if you are overweight, which is the more common scenario, you will be advised to eat less energy foods (carbohydrates). Eating carbohydrates when your work entails sitting all day is detrimental, according to the doctor, because you attain energy that you will not be able to expend. Dr Kakabe stresses the importance of maintaining an appropriate BMI, particularly in relation to blood sugar, blood pressure, and cholesterol. He underscores the role of nutrition and exercise in BMI management, highlighting the risks associated with excessive carbohydrate intake and a sedentary lifestyle.

Cholesterol: Cholesterol is a crucial component of the body, but excessive levels of low-density lipoprotein (LDL), commonly known as “bad cholesterol,” can lead to heart disease and stroke. High LDL cholesterol levels result from factors like a diet rich in fatty foods, a lack of exercise, smoking, alcohol consumption, and obesity. To assess cholesterol levels, a lipid panel blood test is performed, with normal cholesterol levels ideally below 200 mg/dL. Managing cholesterol involves dietary changes, stress reduction, and a balanced diet.

Blood Sugar: Blood sugar, the primary source of energy extracted from the food we consume, needs to be regulated to prevent adverse health effects. High blood sugar levels can lead to conditions like diabetes. Dr Kakabe notes that lifestyle factors, including diet and exercise, play a pivotal role in controlling blood sugar levels. Fasting blood glucose tests can identify abnormal levels, with normal values ranging between 70 and 100 mg/dL.

Blood Pressure: Blood pressure measures the force of blood against artery walls. High blood pressure can damage arteries, increasing the risk of heart disease. Lifestyle choices, including obesity, physical inactivity, alcohol consumption, and stress, can contribute to high blood pressure. According to Dr Kakabe, it is important to maintain a healthy weight, adopt a balanced diet, engage in regular exercise, limit alcohol and tobacco use, and managing stress to normalize blood pressure.

While it is essential to understand these four pillars of cardiovascular health, he stresses that getting regular check-ups with a healthcare professional is crucial. “They can perform blood pressure checks and blood tests to assess cholesterol and blood sugar levels. Preventive care, a balanced diet, physical activity, and stress management are key to maintaining a healthy heart. With knowledge and proactive measures, individuals can embark on a path towards improved cardiovascular health and overall well-being”.