

- Heart diseases / Elderly

## 5 ways to reduce the risk of heart disease

The Welland Tribune · 19 Oct 2024 · B5 · By Jane Pinzhoffer

About 2.6 million Canadians over the age of 20 live with diagnosed heart disease. Heart disease is a general term for a range of conditions that affect the heart's structure and how it functions, including irregular heartbeats, arteriosclerosis or hardening of the arteries, blood vessel diseases, and congenital heart defects. Heart disease is second only to cancer when it comes to leading causes of death in Canada.



According to the Heart and Stroke Foundation, heart disease and stroke are the leading causes of death globally, taking a life in Canada every five minutes. A heart attack occurs when blood flow decreases or stops and the heart doesn't get enough oxygen and nutrients.

There are two main types of stroke. An ischemic stroke occurs when the blood supply to the brain is blocked, preventing oxygen and nutrients from getting to the brain. A hemorrhagic stroke happens when a blood vessel ruptures, causing bleeding in the brain.

As we get older, there are changes in the heart and blood vessels that can increase the risk of heart disease. An aging heart won't beat as quickly during physical activity. However, resting heart rate shouldn't change significantly. The heart wall thickens over time, decreasing the amount of blood that a chamber can hold despite an increase in overall heart size, escalating the risk of atrial fibrillation, which can cause a stroke. Blood vessels become stiffer, making it more difficult for the blood to flow where it's needed, leading to high blood pressure that puts excess stress on the heart and increases the risk of heart failure or other cardiac diseases.

Although some heart diseases are hereditary, others result from poor lifestyle choices. You can reduce your risk by taking positive steps toward a heart-healthy routine. Here are five ways to help protect your heart.

### 1. Eat a heart-healthy diet

Research finds that people who eat plenty of fruits, vegetables and whole grains and less red meat, processed foods, sugar and saturated fats have a reduced risk of cardiac disease. Salt is another thing to avoid. As we age, it can raise blood pressure and increase inflammation. Healthy fats, particularly omega-3 fatty acids, found in foods like cold-water fatty fish, such as salmon, and nuts and seeds like chia seeds, flaxseed and walnuts provide numerous heart-healthy benefits, including smoothing blood flow, encouraging healthy triglyceride levels, and raising high-density lipoprotein (HDL) levels, often referred to as "good cholesterol." The spice turmeric may also protect against cardiac disease by naturally reducing inflammation throughout the body, preventing plaque buildup that can clog the arteries, lowering cholesterol levels and improving circulation.

## 2. Maintain a healthy weight

Being overweight, particularly carrying extra pounds around the middle of the body, is linked to higher blood pressure and cholesterol and an increased risk of heart disease. Body mass index (BMI) uses the ratio of your height to your weight to determine the amount of body fat you have. A BMI of 25 or higher is considered overweight. A BMI of 30 or more is considered obese. In addition to your diet, your physical activity level is key to maintaining a healthy weight.

## 3. Stay physically active

Regular, daily physical activity lowers your risk of high cholesterol, high blood pressure and cardiac disease. Ideally, you should aim for at least 150 minutes of exercise at moderate intensity, such as walking at a brisk pace, and two or more strength training sessions every week. If you haven't been active for a while, you may want to start slowly. Even five minutes of activity throughout the day can help as you work towards longer sessions.

## 4. Maintain good dental health

Scientific research has shown that dental health and heart disease are directly related by spreading bacteria from the mouth to other parts of the body via the bloodstream. When oral bacteria reach the heart, it can cause inflammation, leading to infections of the heart lining, called endocarditis. Oral bacteria and dental disease can also result in clogged arteries and increase the risk of having a stroke.

## 5. Quit smoking

Tobacco is particularly damaging to your heart because it causes plaque to build up on the artery walls. This narrows and hardens the arteries, making it more difficult for the heart to pump blood through them. The numerous chemicals in tobacco can also damage the heart and blood vessels. The effects of tobacco smoke include lowering oxygen levels in the blood and raising heart rate and blood pressure. One of the best things you can do for your heart is to quit smoking. No matter how old you are, it can lower the risk of heart disease. In fact, your risk of heart disease starts to decrease in as little as one day after quitting, and after just one year, your risk shrinks to about half that of a smoker.