

heart health

Coronary heart disease, also known as ischaemic heart disease, is a condition which is caused by narrowing of the arteries supplying blood to the heart muscle. Narrowing of the arteries is caused by cholesterol plaque. Ischaemic heart disease is the 2nd most common cause of death in Singapore and the 3rd most common cause of hospitalisation.

There are risk factors that increase the risk of heart disease. Some can be modified, treated or controlled and some that cannot.

Non-modifiable risk factors include:

Increasing age: The older a person is, the higher the risk.

Male gender: Men have a greater risk of a heart attack than women, and they have heart attacks earlier in life.

Heredity: Children of parents with heart disease are more likely to develop it themselves.

Modifiable risk factors include:

Smoking: Smokers are 2–4 times more likely to develop heart disease. Exposure to passive smoking also increases the risk for non-smokers.

High blood cholesterol: As blood cholesterol rises, so does the risk of coronary heart disease.

High blood pressure: Is also a risk factor for stroke, heart attack, kidney failure and heart failure.

Diabetes mellitus: Seriously increases a person's risk, especially if the blood sugar is not well controlled.

Physical inactivity: Physical activity can help control blood cholesterol, diabetes, and obesity as well as lower blood pressure.

Obesity: Those with excess body fat, especially around the waist, are at higher risk. Body Mass Index (BMI) is used as a guide to gauge obesity. It is calculated using weight in kg divided by height x height (measured in metres). A BMI > 25 is considered overweight, and > 30 is considered obese. Physical inactivity and obesity tend to go together. It is advisable to consult a doctor before starting on an exercise program. A sports physician can assist in planning an appropriate program and provide supervision during the program.

Other factors that can contribute to heart disease risk include:

Stress: People under stress may over-eat, start smoking or increase their smoking, and exercise less.

Alcohol: Excessive drinking can raise blood pressure, cause heart failure, liver disease and other diseases.

Diet and nutrition: Choose a diet rich in vegetables, fruits, whole-grains and high fibre foods, fish, lean protein and low-fat dairy products. Excess caloric intake causes obesity and a diet high in saturated fats can raise cholesterol levels. Those with multiple risk factors like obesity, diabetes and high cholesterol will benefit by working with a nutritionist to work out an appropriate meal plan.



screening for coronary heart disease

Screening is recommended for people over the age of 40 years. Those with risk factors should be screened earlier. Anyone diagnosed with diabetes or high blood pressure will routinely have their cholesterol checked.

Screening requires a consult with your doctor to assess risk factors, checking of body mass index and blood pressure, and a fasting blood test which should at least consist of testing for cholesterol and sugar. Usually an exercise treadmill test is recommended for those with two or more risk factors.

Having a lifestyle conducive for a healthy heart takes effort but the benefits make it all worth while. It is never too late to cultivate 'healthy heart' habits.