

**Q.** What are the best ways to reduce the risk of heart disease?

**A.** Don't smoke. Eat a healthy diet. And get regular exercise. It seems like a simple enough formula, yet about 600,000 people die from heart disease every year in the United States.

Heart disease occurs when fatty deposits attach to artery walls throughout the body, including arteries to your heart. When these deposits slow or block the flow of blood to your heart it can lead to a heart attack or stroke.

But this doesn't happen overnight. Plaque build-up on artery walls typically develops from years of smoking, a diet high in saturated fat and cholesterol, and lack of exercise. That's why men who are 45 or older and women who are 55 or older are more likely to have heart disease than younger people.

Fortunately, you can lower your risk of heart disease by following these three steps:

- 1. Don't smoke cigarettes or cigars, or chew tobacco.** If you already do, quit. Tobacco use severely damages the function of your heart and blood vessels. It also increases plaque build-up that hardens artery walls and limits blood flow to your heart and other parts of your body.
- 2. Reduce the amount of unhealthy fat in your diet.** Healthy fats found in nuts and seeds, fish, soy products, olive oil, and avocados improve heart health and cholesterol levels. These foods are part of a healthy diet.



But unhealthy fats, also called saturated or trans fats, can create fatty deposits that clog your arteries and damage your heart. To reduce the amount of unhealthy fat in your diet, eat less red meat. Choose poultry and other lean meats, or plant-based proteins. Bake, broil, or grill instead of frying foods in butter or animal fats. Choose low-fat milk and cheeses when possible. And limit pastries, sweets, and desserts.

- 3. Get regular exercise.** Aim for 30 to 60 minutes a day of moderate activity like walking, cycling, or even gardening. Exercise helps increase circulation, metabolism, and muscle mass, while making it easier to lose excess weight. Reducing body fat decreases the heart's workload, and makes it easier to deliver oxygen-rich blood your body needs.

Heart disease is currently the leading cause of death in the United States. But it doesn't have to be. You can significantly reduce your risk by avoiding tobacco, eating a healthy diet, and exercising regularly. Other ways to improve your heart health include eating nuts daily, eating more whole-grain breads and cereals, and eating more fruits and vegetables.

Sources:  
*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.*  
*American Heart Association.*  
*American College of Sports Medicine.*

