

A healthy heart, a healthy you

You can prevent and control many heart disease risk factors with heart-healthy lifestyle changes.

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HEART disease and stroke are responsible for a quarter of deaths in Malaysia, and more young people are now being affected according to the third National Health and Morbidity Survey.

Heart disease, or more specifically, cardiovascular diseases (CVDs), include diseases such as heart attack and stroke. It is caused by the build-up of fatty material (or plaque) inside your arteries over time, a process known as atherosclerosis.

When the arteries become too narrow, insufficient amounts of oxygen-rich blood cells reach the heart and muscles, causing immense pain in the chest – this is known as angina.

On the other hand, if a piece of the plaque ruptures, platelets will converge to heal the wounded area and form a blood clot.

Ultimately, the clot blocks the flow of blood to the heart, which can lead to a heart attack.

Meanwhile, a clot that blocks flow of blood to the brain causes a stroke.

There are five potentially fatal risk factors for cardiovascular diseases. These include:

1 Overweight or obesity

The risk of heart failure is 34% higher for overweight individuals and 104% higher for obese people.

Those who are overweight or obese also tend to be more prone to other CVD risk factors such as high blood cholesterol and triglyceride levels, high blood pressure and diabetes.

2 High blood pressure

High blood pressure increases the workload of the heart and blood vessels.

Over time, the force of high blood pressure damages the artery wall.

Plaque starts to build-up at the damaged site, arteries become narrower, blood pressure increases even more, and when the plaque ruptures, clots form, and ultimately, blood flow is blocked.

3 High blood cholesterol levels

LDL (low-density lipoprotein) or “bad” cholesterol is the main source of artery-clogging plaque. Excess triglycerides can also raise heart disease risk.

High-density lipids (HDL) or “good” cholesterol, on the other hand, helps to prevent CVD and associated risk factors.

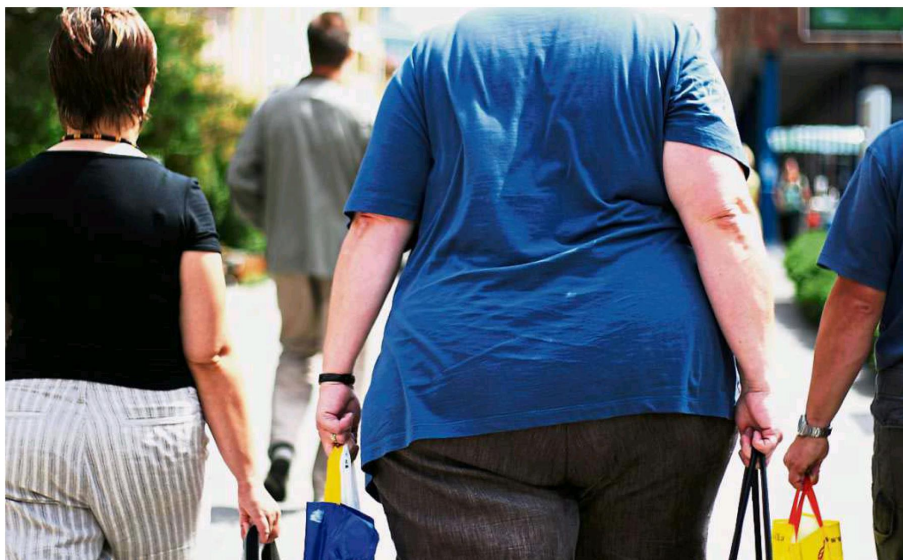
Poor dietary habits, being overweight/obese, and living a sedentary lifestyle are primary factors that contribute to high cholesterol levels.

Eating too much food that contain cholesterol or saturated fats is not good. But this is true for all foods; a healthy diet that is good for the heart (and body) should be balanced and full of nutritious variety.

4 High blood glucose levels

Adults with diabetes are two to four times more likely to die from heart disease than those without.

Both low glucose level and impaired fasting glucose are predictors of risk for stroke and CVD.



The risk of heart failure is 34% higher for overweight individuals and 104% higher for obese people. — AFP



Smoking a pack of cigarettes a day can double the risk of heart disease. — Reuters

Insulin resistance is strongly associated with obesity, and people with diabetes often suffer from hypertension and record unhealthy cholesterol levels.

The combination of these risk factors significantly increases the probability of CVD in diabetics – as is with other factors previously stated.

5 Smoking

Smoking, like high blood pressure, also damages the lining of the arteries, which leads to a build-up of plaque.

Chemicals in each cigarette can also cause blood to thicken and form clots inside your arteries.

Smoking a pack of cigarettes a day can double the risk of heart disease.

Seven tips to keep your heart healthy

Unhealthy dietary habits (diets rich in saturated/trans-fat, lack of fibre, excessive salt intake) coupled with the lack of regular physical activity increase the risk of CVD.

Aim to practise a healthy lifestyle in order to prevent heart disease:

1 Follow the guiding principles of balance, moderation and variety

Eat all foods from the various groups of the food pyramid in moderate portions and choose from a variety of food items within

each food group.

Limit sugary, oily and salty foods that can aggravate CVD risk factors.

2 Eat more fibre

Fibre helps improve blood cholesterol levels, stabilise blood glucose levels, maintain healthy weight and lower the risk of CVD risk factors.

For fibre, include more legumes, whole grains, fruits and vegetables in your daily diet.

Whole grain food products such as brown rice, oat and whole grain breads are excellent sources of fibre, and they also contain other vitamins and minerals.

Oat specifically contains a viscous soluble fibre called beta-glucan, which aids to reduce the total cholesterol and low density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol in your blood.

3 Be physically active

Physical activity, especially aerobic exercises, helps to strengthen the heart muscles, reduce stress levels, improve metabolism and increase the level of HDL cholesterol.

The Malaysian Dietary Guidelines (MDG) recommend 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise, five to six times every day, followed by staying active throughout the day through making more active choices (e.g. taking the stairs instead of elevator, walking to and from lunch/nearby shop instead of

driving).

4 Maintain a healthy body weight

Maintaining a healthy weight or reducing extra weight can significantly reduce the risk of CVD and its risk factors.

Aim for a body mass index (BMI) of between 18.5 and 24.9. A waist circumference of 90 centimetres (35 inches) or more in men, or 80 centimetres (32 inches) or more in women, is associated with health problems such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure.

5 Screen for risk factors regularly

Schedule a yearly check-up for your blood pressure, cholesterol and blood glucose levels. CVD can exist with minimal or no symptoms, hence, estimating your risk of CVD through screening could help doctors consult you on appropriate interventions.

6 Reduce stress and get enough rest

Stress can actually increase blood pressure, and so can the lack of rest. Aim for eight hours of good quality sleep and learn to relax your body, mind and soul from time to time.

7 Stop smoking

Those who smoke a pack of cigarettes a day double their risk of heart attack compared to non-smokers.

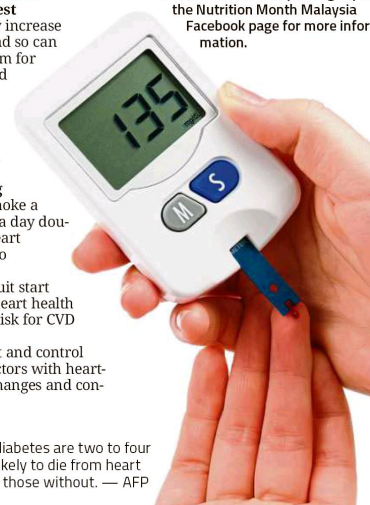
Smokers who quit start to improve their heart health and reduce their risk for CVD immediately.

You can prevent and control many CVD risk factors with heart-healthy lifestyle changes and con-

tinue to live a healthy and happy life with the ones you love. These changes not only protect your heart, but also help to boost overall health.

When your heart is healthy, so are you. Take action now and choose to live a life free from coronary heart disease.

Dr Zawiah Hashim and Dr Chin Yit Siew are council members of the Malaysian Association for the Study of Obesity (MASO). This article is contributed by Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) 2017, an annual community nutrition education initiative jointly organised by the Nutrition Society of Malaysia, Malaysian Dietitians' Association and MASO. To obtain more information on healthy eating and active lifestyle, visit NMM's Food-Fit-Fun Fair at Lower Ground, Centre Court Concourse, IOI City Mall Putrajaya this Wednesday to Sunday. Nutrition screening and counselling is available for free and lots other goodies are up for grabs. Visit www.nutritionmonthmalaysia.org.my or the Nutrition Month Malaysia Facebook page for more information.



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