

Heart Health



Heart Disease

Heat disease is the No. 1 cause of death for American adults. According to the U.S. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, there's no way to eliminate your risk of heart disease, but it's important to know what the risk factors are and what steps you can take, both medically and in terms of lifestyle changes, to reduce your risk.

WHAT IS HEART DISEASE?

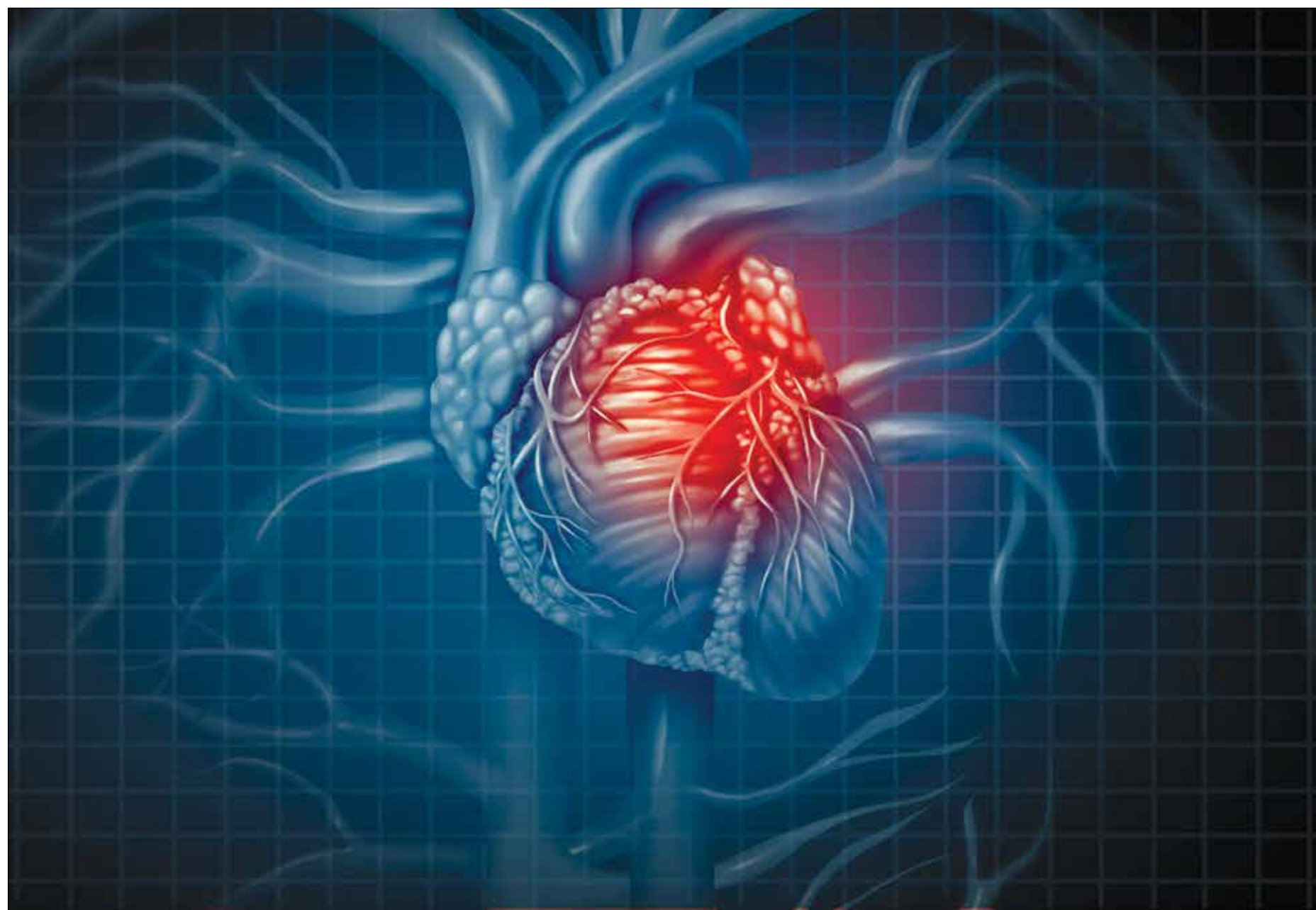
Typically, heart disease refers to coronary heart disease or coronary artery disease. With this condition, coronary arteries are narrow or blocked because of a buildup of cholesterol and fatty material called plaque, which is caused by fat and cholesterol in the blood; high blood pressure; smoking; and too much sugar in the blood. This buildup can block blood flow to the heart and cause chest pain (angina) or a heart attack.

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS?

High blood pressure or cholesterol, smoking, being overweight or obese, not getting sufficient exercise and not having a healthy diet can increase your risk of heart disease. Age and family history also factor into your chances of heart disease; women more than 55 years old and men older than 45 have a greater risk, as are people whose father or brother had heart disease before age 55 or your mother or sister had heart disease before age 65.

WHAT STEPS CAN YOU TAKE?

The least invasive way of reducing your risk of heart disease or control it if you've



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already been diagnosed is taking control of your lifestyle factors that affect the heart. Eat a healthy diet, with lots of fruits, vegetables and fiber, and little saturated and trans fats and added sugars; exer-

cise daily; get to or stay at a healthy weight; stop smoking, if you are a smoker, or avoid secondhand smoke; drink alcohol in moderation; and manage your stress healthfully.

After lifestyle changes, talk to your doctor about medical interventions you can take to keep your risk in check. For patients in their 50s, taking daily aspirin can lower your risk of heart attack and stroke,

but this isn't the right choice for everyone. People between the ages of 40 and 75 who are at high risk of heart attack and stroke can talk to their doctors about statins, which reduce the risk of heart disease.

The Basics of a Heart Attack

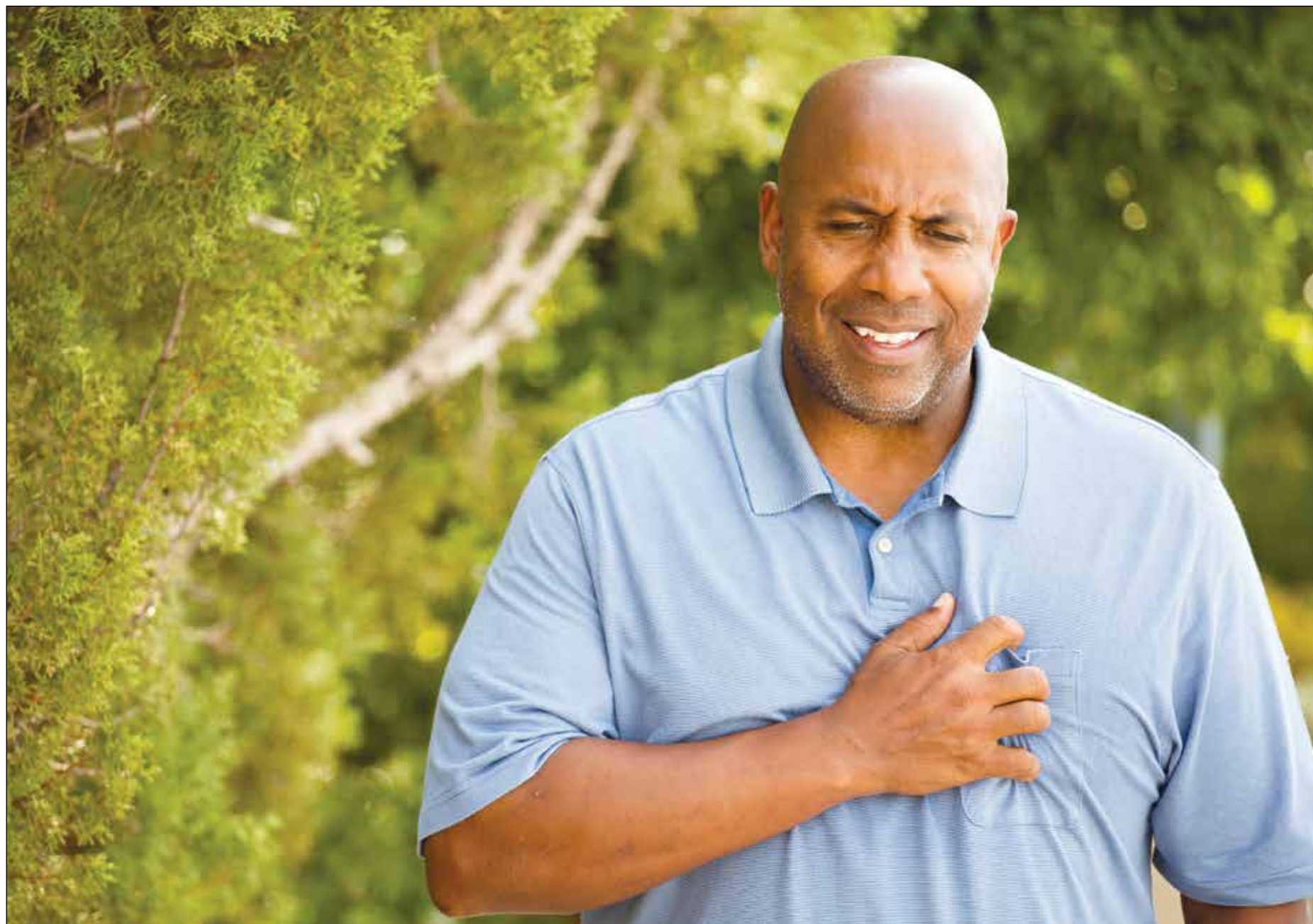
An American has a heart attack about every 40 seconds. While there are other types of heart disease, such as angina or sudden cardiac arrest, heart attacks are the most common manifestations of heart disease.

The U.S. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion and the American Heart Association offer the following information about the signs of a heart attack and what to do if you or someone around is experiencing symptoms.

WHAT IS A HEART ATTACK?

A heart attack occurs when coronary arteries that bring oxygen to the heart are partially or fully blocked, which means the heart isn't getting enough of the oxygen it needs to work. That blockage is caused when arteries become narrowed because of a build-up of fat, cholesterol and plaque. That process, which generally occurs over a long time, is called atherosclerosis.

When plaque breaks off, a blood clot forms around it, which can block flow of oxygenated blood to the heart.



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When the heart doesn't get enough oxygen, the muscle tissue is damaged and can even die, which causes a heart attack, also known as a myocardial infarction.

SIGNS

- Pain, discomfort, a feeling of pressure, squeezing or fullness on the left side or center of the chest.
- Pain or discomfort in the

arms, back, shoulders, neck, jaw or stomach above the belly button.

- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing.
- A feeling similar to heartburn or stomachache.
- Feeling dizzy, lightheaded or more fatigued than normal.
- Breaking out in a cold sweat.

Symptoms can come on suddenly or slowly, so pay

attention to your body if you notice these symptoms. ODPHP recommends talking to your doctor if you've been unusually tired for several days or if you develop new pain or difficulty breathing. If you or someone is experiencing these symptoms, call 911. Treating a heart attack immediately is vital to keeping the permanent damage to the heart to a minimum.

AFTER A HEART ATTACK

How much damage your heart suffers will depend on the amount of tissue supplied by the blocked artery and how much time elapsed between injury and treatment. Most people do recover from heart attacks, even severe attacks, though the heart may be weakened and not able to pump as much blood as it could before the attack.

The Role of Cholesterol

Cholesterol is one of those numbers we've all heard of, we all know it's important, but we don't always understand why it's so important or how it relates to blood pressure.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about one in six American adults has high cholesterol, but often people aren't aware when they have it because there are no symptoms.

WHAT IS IT?

Cholesterol is a naturally occurring substance that the liver makes; it's a waxy, fatty substance needed to make hormones and digest fatty foods. Dietary cholesterol is also found in animal products such as cheese, butter, eggs and meat.

There are two types of cholesterol — low-density lipoprotein, LDL, which is generally considered bad cholesterol, and HDL, or high-density lipoprotein, known as good cholesterol. Too much LDL can build up along blood vessel walls; this is known as plaque and causes blood vessels to narrow, which can contribute to an increased risk of heart disease and stroke. HDL absorbs LDL and takes it back to the liver, which then flushes it out of the body. High LDL lowers the risk of heart disease and stroke.

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS?

A diet high in saturated and trans fats, insufficient exercise, using tobacco or drinking too much alcohol all can contribute to high cholesterol, as can certain health conditions such as dia-



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betes or obesity. Family history can also be a factor, although doctors say that is likely both because of genetics and because families tend to have similar lifestyles.

HIGH CHOLESTEROL TREATMENT

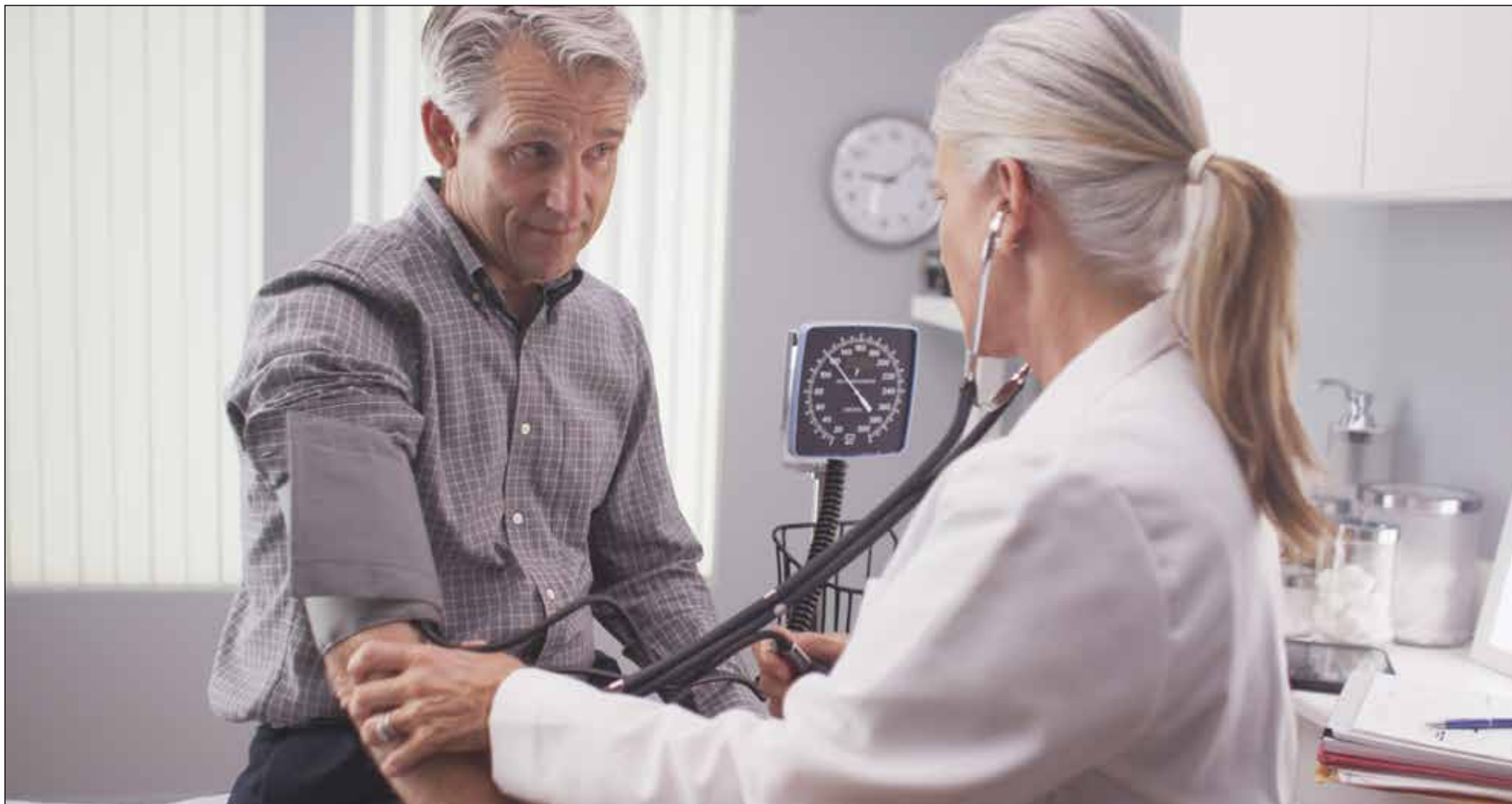
Your doctor will do a blood test for your cholesterol levels when you go in

for an annual physical. Often, blood pressure can be controlled through changes in lifestyle. A diet that is low in trans and saturated fats and low in animal products and added sugars while being high in high-fiber foods such as beans and whole grains; fruits and vegetables; lean meats like fish and unsaturated fats such as olive oil, nuts and

avocados.

Get regular exercise (if you have a sedentary lifestyle now, start with walking every day), keep your alcohol intake to a minimum and maintain a healthy weight.

If that is not enough, there are medications that can help keep your cholesterol in check.



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High Blood Pressure

About a third of American adults have high blood pressure, and they often don't know it until getting tested at their doctor's office.

High blood pressure, or hypertension, doesn't have any symptoms, but it can be a contributing factor in heart disease and stroke, two of the leading causes of death for American adults, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

When your doctor takes your blood pressure, you get two measurements.

Systolic blood pressure, which is the upper number, measures the pressure in your blood vessels when your heart is beating. The lower number is diastolic pressure, and it measures the pressure in blood vessels when your heart rests between beats. Normal blood pressure is 120/80. A measurement of 140/90 is considered high blood pressure.

CAUSES

There's not an easy answer for that. Hypertension usually develops gradually and often is influenced by lifestyle choices, such as not eating a healthy diet, not getting enough exercise or using tobacco. Health conditions like obesity or being overweight can con-

tribute to high blood pressure as well. Age and genetics can also be a factor as well.

A related condition, secondary hypertension, can be caused by conditions like kidney problems, genetic defects, thyroid problems or even medications to treat other conditions. This type of hypertension tends to appear suddenly and lead to higher blood pressure than primary hypertension.

TREATMENT

Although not everyone is able to prevent high blood pressure, many people can make changes to their daily lives to reduce the risk of high blood pressure. Eating a diet that's low

in salt, saturated and trans fats and dietary cholesterol and high in fruits and vegetables, whole grains and fiber can lower your risk, as well as contributing to a maintaining a healthy weight. Getting enough exercise, which for most people is at least 30 minutes a day of walking, running, biking, swimming, yoga or hiking, also helps. If you're not exercising regularly now, ease into it with short walks, stretching and other low-impact exercises.

Many people also can control high blood pressure through these lifestyle factors. For those who can't, talk to your doctor about medications and what treatment is best to keep your blood pressure down.

Healthy Weight Loss

Being overweight or obese can lead to heart problems; carrying around extra weight puts more stress on the heart, and extra weight can also contribute to conditions like heart disease, stroke and diabetes.

Losing just a few pounds can have dramatic results on your health, leading to lower cholesterol, blood pressure and blood sugars, which can lessen your propensity for or the symptoms of chronic diseases.

Healthy weight loss is a slow process; don't get discouraged when you're not losing weight quickly. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offered the most important things to do when losing or maintaining weight.

TALK WITH YOUR DOCTOR

A healthy weight and weight loss regimen look different for different people. Talk to your doctor about a healthy range for your height, body type and activity level and the best ways to lose weight and keep that weight off. You may want to talk to a nutritionist as well.

MAKE A HEALTHY FOOD PLAN

Cutting calories is among the most important things to do when losing weight. Do this slowly; if you're eating 2,500 calories a day, don't cut back to 1,500 right away. Slowly work down as you lose weight. To make sure you're getting the most out of your daily calories, eat fruits, vegetables, fat-free or low-fat

dairy, whole grains, lean meats like fish and other lean proteins, like nuts, beans and eggs. Keep foods that are high in saturated fats, salt and added sugars to a minimum, although you don't have to cut them out entirely.

Cut down on processed and fast foods, which means

more meal preparation and cooking. Plan ahead where you can, and when you're cooking, make things that you can refrigerate or freeze, or cook foods that you can use the leftovers in other dishes.

Additionally, look for ways to make your favorite foods

healthier. Whole-grain bread and pasta and brown rice are good substitutes in many dishes.

EXERCISE

Exercise without eating better won't help you lose much weight, but the combination of the two can help

you lose weight without cutting out quite as many calories. For weight maintenance, the CDC recommends 150 minutes per week of moderately intense aerobic activity like a brisk walk, biking or gym classes. Yoga and weight lifting are also good low-impact exercises.



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Eating for Heart Health

You might be surprised by how much salt, fat and sugar sneaks into your diet on a regular basis. Even healthy eaters may use canned or processed goods or freezer meals with a lot of sodium. Eating healthfully can taste good and leave you sated, though it often requires more cooking and eating at home than many people are used to.

However, you don't have to spend hours in the kitchen every week to make positive changes in your eating habits. The American Heart Association offered tips on making your diet healthful, well-balanced and delicious.

MAKE MEALS AND SNACKS COLORFUL

This means natural colors, of course. Introduce a variety of fruits and vegetables at every meal and every time you snack. Look for fresh produce, but frozen and canned fruits and vegetables offer the same benefits and may mean less work on your part. (Just make sure your fruit is canned in juice, not syrup.) Frozen and canned produce can also give you a wider variety of options for off-season fruits and vegetables, which will help keep you and your family from getting bored.

EAT WHOLE FOODS WHENEVER POSSIBLE

Check the ingredients on food like bread. How many ingredients does it have? Can you pronounce them all? Look for foods that are made of ingredients with names you recognize. If you want fried rice, enchiladas or pizza, make it yourself instead of buying a freezer dish. This allows you to control the amount of salt and fat that goes into it and



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ensures you know what's actually going into your body. If you're not comfortable cooking, start small: find easy recipes with ingredients you're comfortable with.

AVOID PROCESSED FOODS

According to the AHA, half of Americans' calories and 90 percent of added sugars come from highly processed foods. Milk, bread and chopped vege-

tables are processed, as are chips, fish sticks and everything in the freezer section, so processed doesn't always mean bad. But you can make healthier choices on processed foods,

sticking with minimal processing, such as foods that have been cut, cooked or packaged, but still retain their basic features, and avoid highly processed foods.

Managing Stress

We often don't consider the physical strain that the stresses of life put on our bodies, including our hearts, but stress, particularly chronic stress, takes a toll. According to Go Red for Women, the body reacts to stress by releasing adrenaline, which causes breathing and heart rate to speed up and blood pressure to increase.

Chronic stress can mean days or weeks of increased blood pressure and heart rate, which can damage the artery walls and lead to a weakened immune system.

Additionally, stress can lead to poor eating, lack of exercise, poor sleep habits, too much alcohol and other lifestyle choices that can lead to a greater risk of heart disease.

HOW DO I MANAGE STRESS?

No medication can make you good at handling stress. Rather, you need to recognize when you're getting stressed, do what you can to plan ahead to avoid or reduce stress and find what stress management techniques work for you. According to the U.S. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, people who are stressed feel worry, anger, irritation and depression and often are unable to focus or cope with their normal tasks. They tend to be more likely to snap at others, lose patience or make mistakes, all of which adds to their stress and forming a dangerous cycle. Many people also experience physical symptoms when under stress, including headaches, back pain, upset stomach, weight fluctuation and tense muscles.

When you experience



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stress, make sure you're taking care of yourself physically: eat well, sleep, exercise. Find time to relax: do yoga or meditation or spend a few minutes stretching, make time to talk with a friend and give yourself permission to take time off

work or step away from a stressful situation until you've calmed down. When you know your stressors, make a plan to avoid those triggers or plan to mitigate the amount of time you need to spend in those situations.

GET HELP

Some people experience long-term stressful events, such as a chronic illness in themselves or a loved one, the death of a loved one, ongoing financial and work problems, ongoing problems with a

partner or child or stress related to trauma, which can be post-traumatic stress disorder. People in these categories should talk to their doctor and ask about seeing a licensed therapist or other interventions that are available.