

WHO - Question and answer: What can I do to avoid a heart attack or a stroke?

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Answer: WHO estimates that more than 17.3 million people died of cardiovascular diseases such as heart attack or stroke in 2008. Contrary to popular belief, four out of five of these deaths occurred in low- and middle-income countries, and men and women were equally affected.

The good news, however, is that 80% of premature heart attacks and strokes are preventable. Healthy diet, regular physical activity, and not using tobacco products are the keys to prevention.

Eat a healthy diet: A balanced diet is crucial to a healthy heart and circulation system. This should include plenty of fruit and vegetables, whole grains, lean meat, fish and pulses, and restricted salt, sugar and fat intake.

Take regular physical activity: At least 30 minutes of regular physical activity every day helps to maintain cardiovascular fitness; at least 60 minutes on most days helps to maintain healthy weight.

Avoid tobacco use: Tobacco in every form is very harmful to health - cigarettes, cigars, pipes, or chewable tobacco. Exposure to second-hand tobacco smoke is also dangerous. The risk of heart attack and stroke starts to drop immediately after a person stops using tobacco products, and can drop by as much as half after one year.

Check and control your cardiovascular risk:

Know your blood pressure: High blood pressure usually has no symptoms, but can cause a sudden stroke or heart attack. Have your blood pressure checked.

Know your blood sugar: Raised blood glucose (diabetes) increases the risk of heart attacks and strokes. If you have diabetes it is very important to control your blood pressure and blood sugar to minimize the risk.

Know your blood lipids: Raised blood cholesterol and abnormal blood lipids increase the risk of heart attacks and strokes. Blood cholesterol needs to be controlled through a healthy diet and, if necessary, by appropriate medications.