

Benefit Update

Retail Clerks Welfare Trust • February 2007



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Reducing Your Risk of Heart Disease and Diabetes

Heart disease and diabetes are two of the most critical health problems faced by people in America. Although many people think cancer is the number one killer in the country, it's not. The fact is, in America you have a greater risk of dying from heart disease than from any other disease.

What about diabetes? Well, first of all, it significantly increases your risk of having a heart attack. Plus it can lead to a host of other serious health problems, from blindness and kidney failure to circulatory problems that can result in amputation of your lower limbs.

That said, there is a lot you can do to reduce your risk of getting these diseases—and many of the same actions that you can take to protect your heart will also help protect you against diabetes. This issue of *Benefit Update* will help you get a better understanding of these two diseases and the steps you can take to minimize your chances of developing them.

Understanding Heart Disease

Let's start by taking a closer look at heart disease—at what your chances are of dying from it, what causes a heart attack, and what the symptoms of a heart attack are.

Just How Bad Is It?

Each year about 1.1 million people in America have heart attacks, and about 460,000 of those are fatal.¹ In fact, every 33 seconds someone dies of cardiovascular disease²—and for many of these people, death is the first indication that

they have a heart problem, because they have no symptoms.³ About half of the heart attack deaths occur within one hour of the start of symptoms.⁴

What's more, heart disease doesn't just attack men: it is the number one killer of women, as well, accounting for one in three women's deaths. In fact, every year since 1984, more women than men have died of cardiovascular disease.⁵ That's why, regardless of whether you are male or female, it's important to take good care of your heart.

What Causes a Heart Attack?

Your coronary arteries—the arteries that feed your heart—provide the heart muscle with the oxygen-rich blood it needs to function. When plaque deposits form within these arteries, they narrow the passageway through which the blood flows. Just as traffic on the freeway slows down when a lane is blocked off, a narrower artery passage will slow the flow of blood, making it more likely to clot.

When a blood clot blocks a coronary artery, your heart won't be able to receive the oxygen it needs, and the heart muscle cells will start to die. Once this process starts, there is a good chance you may have permanent heart damage, since the dead muscle cells cannot be regenerated. In fact, your heart may fail completely, and you might die. This is why it's so important to call 911 if you think you may be experiencing the symptoms of a heart attack—even if you're not sure. Getting medical help immediately can lessen the

damage to your heart and can possibly save your life!

What Are the Symptoms of a Heart Attack?

The symptoms of a heart attack can vary widely from one person to the next—and men's symptoms are often different from those of women. As with men, women's most common heart attack symptom is chest pain or discomfort. But women are somewhat more likely than men to experience some of the other common symptoms, particularly shortness of breath, nausea/vomiting, and back or jaw pain.

Signs that you may be having a heart attack include:

- **Chest pain or pressure.** You may feel pain or pressure in your chest—like it's being squeezed or has a heavy weight on it. Sometimes the pain is sudden and intense, but more often the discomfort is milder, and may come and go.
- **Upper body pain or discomfort.** You may experience shooting pain in one or both arms—or in your back, neck, jaw, or stomach. In fact, some people interpret early heart attack symptoms as upset stomach or heartburn.
- **Shortness of breath.** You may find it difficult to breathe normally.
- **Nausea, sweating, or dizziness.** You may feel flu-like symptoms, including nausea, sweating, or dizziness.

If you experience chest pain or discomfort for up to five minutes—especially if it's accompanied by one of these other symptoms—and it's not relieved by rest or medication, don't wait: call 911 immediately! The best chances for survival happen when you get medical help within an hour of your symptoms. And while you're waiting for medical help to arrive, consider taking an aspirin. Aspirin can help thin your blood, so if what you're experiencing is a

heart attack, it may help prevent permanent damage to your heart. (Note: if you are taking blood thinners, be sure to check with your doctor before taking aspirin.)

Understanding Diabetes

Diabetes is a serious disease—not only because of its direct effects on your body, but also because it increases your chances of heart attack, kidney failure, blindness, and circulatory problems. In fact, more than 65 percent of people with diabetes die from a heart attack or stroke.⁶ If you catch the problem early, however, there are steps you can take to keep diabetes under control.

What Is Diabetes?

If you have diabetes, it means your body can't handle its blood sugar properly. The normal range for a blood sugar reading after an overnight fast is between 80 and 110 (or, according to some experts, between 80 and 100). If your fasting blood sugar level is 126 or higher, you probably have diabetes. If it's between 100 and 126, you may be prediabetic, which means you are at greater risk than the general population of becoming diabetic.⁷

About an hour after you've eaten, your blood sugar can go up as high as 150. But if it's 200 or above, you're likely to be diabetic. In extreme cases, diabetics can have blood sugar levels as high as eight times the normal level. At these levels, the disease can be fatal if left untreated.

What part of the body causes diabetes? The cause of the problem is the amount of insulin produced by your pancreas. Your body uses insulin to convert sugar and starches

¹ Source: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, www.nhlbi.nih.gov/actintime/aha/aha.htm

² Source: Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/publications/factsheets/Prevention/cvh.htm>

³ Source: National Heart Lung and Blood Institute, http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/HeartAttack/HeartAttack_Signs.html

⁴ Source: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, www.nhlbi.nih.gov/actintime/aha/aha.htm

⁵ Source: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/firstlady/initiatives/womenandheartdisease4.html>

⁶ Source: www.diabetes.org/diabetes-heart-disease-stroke.jsp

⁷ Source: http://www.webmd.com/hw/diabetes_1_2/hw8252.asp

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into the energy it needs to function properly. When you have diabetes, either your pancreas doesn't produce enough insulin, or it makes enough but your body doesn't use it the way it should.

Two Types of Diabetes

There are actually two types of diabetes: Type I and Type II.

In Type I diabetes, your body destroys the cells of the pancreas that produce insulin. Because Type I often shows up in children and teenagers, it's important for even young people to watch for the signs of diabetes.

Type II diabetes more often affects adults—usually people in middle age. Overweight people are especially susceptible to this type of diabetes. In Type II diabetes, either the pancreas doesn't produce enough insulin to keep your blood sugar under control, or your body doesn't use the insulin properly.

There are 20.8 million children and adults in the US with diabetes—and nearly one-third of them (or 6.2 million people) do not know they have it. To determine your risk for diabetes, take the risk test at www.diabetes.org/risk-test.jsp.

What Are the Symptoms of Diabetes?

You might have diabetes if you experience any of the following symptoms:

- You find yourself thirsty all the time, especially after drinking sweetened beverages.
- You lose weight, even though you're eating more.
- You urinate more frequently—sometimes hourly.
- You feel fatigued and weak.
- You experience frequent eye irritations or blurred vision.

If you experience one or more of these symptoms, and they are not due to other illnesses, ask your doctor for a diabetes check-up.

How Can You Protect Yourself Against Heart Disease and Diabetes?

While some risk factors—like your age, race, and family history—are beyond your control, following a healthy lifestyle will go a long way toward protecting you against both diseases. Because heart disease and diabetes are related, many of the lifestyle changes that help protect you against one will also minimize your chances of getting the other. By controlling your cholesterol and blood pressure, eating a balanced diet, maintaining a healthy weight, and staying active, you can significantly reduce your risk of both heart disease and diabetes. And stopping smoking is particularly helpful in protecting you against heart disease.

Stop Smoking

Smokers' risk of developing coronary heart disease is two to four times that of nonsmokers⁸—and if

⁸Source: www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=500

you have diabetes, it puts you at an even greater risk, since diabetics are already in a higher-risk group for heart attack than the general population.⁹ Consider how tobacco smoke affects your body:

- It decreases the amount of oxygen that reaches your heart.
- It increases your blood pressure and heart rate.
- It makes your blood more likely to clot.
- It damages the cells that line your coronary arteries and other blood vessels.
- It decreases the level of HDL ("good" cholesterol) in your bloodstream.

And consider this: tobacco smoke affects not only your own health, but also the health of the people around you—especially children. Second-hand smoke can cause non-smokers to develop chronic respiratory conditions, cancer, and heart disease. In fact, it is estimated that around 35,000 nonsmokers die from heart disease each year as a result of exposure to second-hand tobacco smoke.¹⁰

If you are a smoker, stopping smoking is the number one way to decrease your risk of heart attack—and it's never too late to take this all-important step. For helpful tips on how to quit, go to the American Lung Association website, www.lungusa.org.

Keep Your Cholesterol and Blood Pressure Under Control

Many people in America don't even know they are at risk for heart attack and diabetes because they don't have their cholesterol and blood pressure checked regularly. Cholesterol is a type of fat that can lead to clogged arteries. High blood pressure puts stress on your arteries and can damage them—along with your heart and kidneys.

Your doctor can check your cholesterol levels with a simple blood test and can also measure your blood pressure, to see if both are within healthy limits. If they are high, your doctor can help you manage the problem through diet, exercise, and in some cases, medication. The Plan provides coverage for this testing as part of the preventive care benefit. Refer to your Plan booklet for more information.

Eat Right and Maintain a Healthy Weight

Eating a balanced diet that is low in fat, sodium, and refined sugars and full of antioxidant-rich foods (such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and nuts) will help you maintain a healthy heart. It will also help keep your weight down—one of the biggest risk factors for diabetes.

⁹Source: www.webmd.com/content/pages/9/1675_57840

¹⁰Source: http://www.webmd.com/content/pages/9/1675_57857

How do you know if you're overweight? One way is by measuring your Body Mass Index (BMI), which measures your weight compared to your height. According to the American Heart Association, a healthy BMI is **between 18.5 and 24.9**. A BMI between 25 and 29.9 is considered to be overweight; a BMI of 30 or greater is considered to be obese; and one of 40 or greater is considered to be extremely obese.

So, how do you determine your BMI? The most precise way is to divide your weight in kilograms by your height in meters, squared. The formula is:

$$\text{BMI} = \text{weight (kg)} \div \text{height (m)}^2$$

To convert pounds to kilograms, multiply pounds by 0.45. To convert inches to meters, multiply inches by 0.0254.

So, for example, suppose you weigh 180 pounds and are 5'10" tall. Multiplying 180 by 0.45, you get 81 kilograms. Your 5'10" height is equivalent to 70 inches (5 feet X 12 inches per foot = 60, + 10 inches = 70). Multiplying 70 inches X .0254 gives you 1.78 meters. Now you need to square the 1.78 meters by multiplying it times itself: 1.78 X 1.78 = 3.17. Finally, divide 81 kilograms by 3.17 and you get 25.5. That's your BMI.

Or you may find it easier to use the American Heart Association formula, which is based on pounds and inches. To use this formula, multiply your weight in pounds by 703, divide by your height in inches, and then divide again by your height in inches. The result may be slightly different from the result you get using the kilograms-and-meters formula, but it will still be close. Using the same example as before—a weight of 180 pounds and a height of 5'10"—you would multiply 180 by 703, which gives you 126,540. Then you would divide 126,540 by 70 inches (your height), which gives you 1,808. Dividing 1,808 by 70 inches again gives you 25.8.

However you measure your BMI, if it's higher than it should be, talk to your doctor about how you can bring it down through diet and exercise. It's an important step that can significantly reduce your risk of both heart disease and diabetes.

Exercise! Exercise! Exercise!

Regular exercise is also an important step you can take—both to prevent heart disease and diabetes and to manage them if you already have one or both diseases. Exercise burns calories, increases your strength and stamina, and helps keep your heart and lungs working efficiently.

Even if you haven't exercised much before, if you start an exercise program now, your health will benefit—no matter what your age. You don't have to

invest in expensive equipment, join a gym, or dramatically change your daily routine—and you don't have to fit all your exercise into a single session. Throughout the day, anything you do that gets you up and moving will help. Even daily activities, such as cleaning the house or working in the garden, count as exercise and can help keep you healthy. The key is to sit less and move more!

Some simple steps you can take to get started include:

- **Turning off the TV.** If you aren't glued to the TV, you're more likely to engage in more active pursuits.
- **Parking farther away.** If you park at the far end of the parking lot rather than grabbing the nearest space, you'll burn a few more calories getting to work or the store.
- **Taking the stairs.** Even if you go up only one floor, taking the stairs instead of the elevator every day will make a difference.
- **Walking at lunchtime or on your break.** Even if you have only 10 minutes, a brisk daily walk at lunchtime or on your break will make a difference over time. And if you add a 10-minute walk in the morning (say, by parking farther away from work) and a 10-minute walk after dinner, now you're up to 30 minutes a day—which is enough to achieve significant health benefits.

It's always a good idea to check with your physician before starting an exercise program—particularly if you are older, already have some heart problems, or have other health problems. Your doctor can help you determine what level of exercise is best for you to start with.

It's Up to You

While you can't control some of the risk factors for heart disease and diabetes, such as your family history and your age, you can do a lot to reduce your risk of getting these diseases. Knowing the risks and warning signs and making healthy lifestyle choices are a great first step. So get started today!

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Published as a service of Zenith Administrators, Inc.