



Risk Factors for Heart Disease You May Not Know About

Clinicians say we need to protect our hearts by moving, eating healthily, not smoking, and managing blood pressure and sugar. There's more to the story.

What are the lesser-known risks of cardiovascular disease (CVD)?

- **Chronic stress** can cause inflammation, which can contribute to high blood pressure and lower “good” HDL cholesterol.
 - Nighttime is when your body repairs itself, and **sleep deficits** can increase risk for CVD and stroke.
 - Sleep interruptions from **sleep apnea** can lead to high blood pressure, belly fat and irregular heartbeats.
 - Helpful GI bacteria break down certain foods — too much “bad” bacteria in your **gut microbiome** could mean more byproducts that harm cholesterol and blood vessels.
 - People who reported **social isolation and loneliness** saw a 29% increased risk for a heart event and a 32% increased risk for a stroke.
 - The thyroid gland is a key player in heart and vascular health. Those with **thyroid dysfunction** can see an increase in CVD — including atrial fibrillation and high cholesterol.
 - **Pregnancy-related cardiovascular complications**, like pre-term birth, preeclampsia and hypertension of pregnancy, happen to 1 in 7 women, which can increase lifetime risk for stroke and heart failure.
 - **Menstruation** usually begins between ages 10 and 15. For women outside of that range, CVD risk goes up.
 - **Early menopause:** Similarly, if your period ended early due to something like surgical removal of the ovaries, heart health can take a hit. Women who start menopause before age 40 have a 40% higher lifetime risk of coronary heart disease.
- For women who are 20 years and older, almost half are living with cardiovascular disease — and some don't know it.
- **Cancer therapy:** Lifesaving treatments like chemotherapy and radiation can have negative side effects, called cardiotoxicity, which can persist after cancer therapy ends.
 - **Oral health:** The jury's out on whether there's a direct connection between oral and heart health, but there's a correlation between people with gum disease and coronary heart disease and high blood pressure — possibly owing to inflammation or harmful bacteria in the gums that gets into blood vessels.

The population you're in can predict CVD risk

- Hypertension rates vary by race. In one analysis, 59% of Black adults had hypertension — the rate was under 45% for Hispanic, White and Asian adults.
- Unemployed people had an 84% higher risk of a dangerous heart event and nearly 3x the risk of death compared with their employed peers.
- Low-income individuals with high blood pressure have a higher risk of mortality than others with high blood pressure.

What to do?

1. Ask your clinician to run baseline tests to see how your heart is running. If tests uncover a problem, they may prescribe medication, lifestyle changes or other interventions.
2. If you're going through cancer, add a cardio-oncologist to your specialist team so you can continue to get treatment and protect your heart.
3. Schedule regular dental checkups and brush and floss your teeth regularly.
4. Realize what you can change — and what you can't. Do little things every day that help your heart. Meet up with friends for a walk and eat a healthy dinner after.

