



# Your Heart

What you need to know to  
make it healthy and strong.  
And no, it's not too late.

By Lonna Whiting



**C**ardiovascular disease (CVD) is the leading cause of death in all states. Obesity and lack of physical exertion are two components to this widespread and growing epidemic. The disease isn't ageist, often runs in families and is responsible for about one death every 37 seconds.

In fact, everyone at some point in his or her life will develop at least one risk factor related to cardiovascular disease. In general, just getting older makes humans more susceptible to developing heart issues, says Dr. Susan Farkas, a cardiologist at MeritCare in Fargo.

"After a certain age, everyone should have an assessment," Farkas says.

Many of a person's lifelong habits begin in childhood or early adolescence, which means the development of cardiovascular disease isn't always an old person's problem. But while aging is inevitable, and we can't change our family's health history, most other factors that increase one's risk of developing CVD are quite preventable.

Being obese, a smoker, having high blood pressure and/or blood cholesterol, being sedentary, and having diabetes are all modifiable

factors related to CVD.

Farkas, who specializes in women's heart health, suggests adults, regardless of gender, log onto the American Heart Association website ([www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)) and take the heart disease risk assessment calculator. You will need to know your weight, resting blood pressure and your cholesterol numbers to take the assessment. The tool will tell you your chances of having a cardiac event within the next ten years.

Always discuss any online assessments you take with your doctor.

### **Going Red for Women**

Though heart disease is not gender-specific, women and heart health is definitely in the limelight, partially due to an old, albeit erroneous, assumption that cardiovascular disease is primarily a man's problem.

According to Go Red for Women, an American Heart Association Learn and Live program, one in three women die each year of heart disease, while one in 30 die of breast cancer.

Ninety percent of women have at least one

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### **Could you have Cardiovascular Disease (CVD)?**

The Mayo Clinic has outlined general criteria for risk factors related to developing cardiovascular diseases:

- Age
- Family history
- Gender
- Tobacco use
- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Sedentary lifestyle
- Diabetes
- Stress
- Being overweight
- Excessive use of alcohol

factor, and just one in five believe that heart disease is her greatest health threat.

“Women never take care of themselves first,” Farkas says. “Women can have heart disease. Women can have a heart attack.”

Farkas adds that women who are suffering or have suffered heart attacks are less likely to go to the doctor than men. “We want to empower women and make them make little changes at a time.”

Farkas suggests women go for walks with friends and family. MeritCare offers support groups for women who have CVD, which has become “a very powerful tool for women,” she says.

Regardless of a person’s gender, both men and women would do well to stop smoking and lose weight, Farkas says.

Farkas hopes that once people know their numbers and know just how at risk they are of developing CVD, “next time, they want to order a Big Mac, they will try the veggie burger instead.”

The American Heart Association reports that caring for people with heart diseases cost \$304.6 billion in 2009 alone. While you can’t change your hereditary predisposition for certain diseases or reverse the aging process, most CVD risk factors are modifiable. Here are a few of them:

## Stress

According to the American Heart Association, the connection between stress and heart disease is unclear. Because everyone feels stress at certain times in their lives, and because it’s hard to measure one’s reaction to stress, its effect on the overall heart health of a person isn’t well understood.

Researchers and experts do agree that stress can lead to behaviors that put people more at risk of developing CVD. For instance, in stressful times, people may turn to heavy alcohol use or drug abuse. They may eat more of the wrong types of food, and they may take up smoking. All of these behavioral choices increase one’s risk of eventually developing heart problems.

“There is a condition called Apical Ballooning Syndrome that is purely related to stress,” Farkas says. The syndrome is also known as “broken heart syndrome.” The condition creates a ballooning effect in the heart, which eventually weakens the muscle and causes chest pain and other symptoms similar to a traditional heart

## Kids at heart

Juice is not what your child needs. Your children need greens and fresh fruit, fresh air and daily doses of vigorous exercise. And according to Dr. Matthew Trefz, pediatric cardiologist at MeritCare in Fargo, the No. 1 heart-healthy habit you can instill in your child is balanced nutrition.

While this probably comes as no surprise to most, think about it the next time you’re adding extra cheese instead of veggies to your family’s sandwiches.

“Limit bad foods. Avoid fast food altogether. These are crucial elements in preventing heart problems later in life,” Trefz says.

As for the juice debate, Trefz advises parents to completely nix it from a child’s diet.

“Basically, fruit juice is sugar water with a few extra nutrients in it, and with the same sugar content as a can of soda,” he says. “Give kids a real apple or an orange, because juice can have the same heart-damaging effects as sugar sodas.”

If a child is suffering from weight issues, they are already becoming good candidates for cardiac problems later in life. And don’t blame it on the genes. Next time a family says, “We’re just big-boned,” or “We’ve always been portly,” think again. Trefz says a child’s environment has as much to do with how much he or she weighs as does heredity.

“What you’re exposed to at a young age will affect” what you eat and how much you exercise, he adds. “If they have one parent who is obese, the likelihood that they will grow up to be obese grows. If they have two parents



who are obese, then they are twice as likely” to have weight issues.

In some cases, diet and exercise are the least of a family’s worries. While only an estimated .5 to one percent of babies born in America have some form of congestive heart disease, it has a monumental impact on a child and family’s well-being for the rest of their lives.

Trefz, just one of two pediatric cardiologists in North Dakota, helps diagnose congenital heart disorders in children, infants, and in many cases, fetuses.

“Either I get to tell the family there’s nothing wrong—which is usually the case—or I help find solutions that will take care of the child’s heart problem and help them grow into healthier people,” he says.

Many congenital heart disorders are hereditary, so it’s important for families to talk honestly with their doctor about their family’s health history.

One diagnostic tool Trefz believes is an exciting innovation in detecting heart problems even before a child is born is called fetal echocardiogram.

The test is usually conducted after an ultrasound has revealed that there could be something wrong with the fetus’ heart.

“The fetal echocardiogram allows us to prepare for that child to be born and we can react to it before the child has a chance to get sick,” Trefz said. “Just a few decades ago, in many cases there was not much doctors could do, and most likely, the baby would have just been sent home with the family.”

Fetal echocardiogram and diagnostic tools like it have helped the one-year survival rate for infants with a congenital heart disorder climb from zero percent just 20 years ago, to 90 percent today.

“Every child is different. They could have the same disorder, but their hearts are going to be different,” Trefz says, which makes diagnosing heart disorders as early as possible quite important.

attack.

Farkas says the treatment for Apical Ballooning Syndrome is similar to a regular heart attack: medication, implantation of certain medical devices that help relax the heart, rest and stress reduction therapy.

So far, the best advice experts have in keeping stress at bay is to practice

meditation, deep breathing, exercise regularly, take up yoga and get plenty of rest.

## Obesity

Carrying a lot of extra weight increases the workload on the heart, which in turn can result in the development of heart disease. Likewise, obesity increases bad

## Preventable risk factors for CVD that you can start changing today

About 80 million Americans have some form of cardiovascular disease.

Likewise, one in every three deaths can be linked to preventable heart problems.

Here are some facts about modifiable risk factors, according to the American Heart Association:

- Smokers have double to triple the risk of developing CVD.

- Couch potatoes are 1.5 to 2.4 times more likely to develop CVD.
- Overweight and obese people have a lower life expectancy and are more prone to developing CVD, even when no other risk factors are present.
- Diabetics are 2 to 4 times more likely to have heart disease.

*Source: American Heart Association*

cholesterol, lowers good cholesterol and may increase one's chances of developing diabetes, all of which are major factors related to CVD.

### Cholesterol

The American Heart Association says that if every adult in America decreased their total cholesterol levels by ten percent, there would be an estimated 30 percent reduction in the incidence of CVD. A healthy total cholesterol level is 200 mg/dL or lower.

Ways to decrease cholesterol include:

- Exercise: Getting ample exercise increases the levels of good cholesterol in the body, which help decrease the levels of bad cholesterol.
- Avoid fats, saturated fats and trans fats: Don't eat fried food. Limit your cheese and red meat consumption. Replace these foods with heart-healthy beans, legumes, greens, fish, nuts, seeds and fruits.
- Medication: Ask your doctor about cholesterol-lowering medication and whether or not it may be a good choice for you.

### Inactivity

You're on a clear path to developing CVD if you sit at your desk all day and then move to the couch for the rest of the night when you get home. Adding exercise to your daily life helps you drop unwanted pounds, decreases stress, and blood pressure and total cholesterol levels, all of which help reduce your chances of getting CVD.

### Alcohol and tobacco use

Heavy alcohol abuse causes diseases of the liver, pancreas and nervous system. Too much alcohol can raise blood pressure and can cause a normally levelheaded person to make dangerous lifestyle choices, like



smoking cigarettes and participating in illegal drug use. Likewise, tobacco use increases blood pressure, which invites a host of other cardiovascular problems.

### Diabetes Mellitus

The relationship between diabetes and the heart is a complex one, and having diabetes increases your chances of developing CVD. Talk to your doctor if you have diabetes or if diabetes runs in your family.

### Technology

As technology advances, so does the survival rate for patients with CVD. While awareness and early intervention are crucial in patient outcomes, medication and surgical innovations are also being made each day.

Farkas says stents, which are devices that open clogged arteries, are stronger

and need less maintenance than they did in the past. "Newer stents are decreasing the number of surgeries people are needing. And unlike before, people who have already had a bypass will still qualify for stents if needed."

Likewise, stage procedures, or multiple stent placements, have been shown to be as effective or even better than traditional bypass surgery. "These new technologies are better and there are less complications," Farkas says.

### Fun, Fabulous Food

One of the easiest and most satisfying ways people can make healthy heart decisions right away is by adopting a brave new diet full of fresh greens, whole grains, fruit and lean meats, and by eliminating fast food.

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## Heart-healthy hero: Rick Wagar

**W**hen Rick Wagar lost his 53-year-old brother to a stroke, he set out on a mission to reclaim his own health. “Like everyone else, I always talked about getting heart healthy by quitting smoking and losing those extra pounds, but it wasn’t until my sister mentioned that my brother would never get to see his grandkids that it really sunk in that I had to do something.”

A few months later, Wagar braved the wind, rain, snow and cold to watch a friend run in the inaugural Fargo Marathon. As he sat in his warm vehicle, eating a donut and smoking a cigarette, Wagar was amazed to see that the runners were all sizes, shapes and ages, and that “at mile 22, none had any quit in them.”

The next Monday he started training for the next marathon. By the time the 2006 Fargo Marathon rolled around, Wagar had lost over 50 pounds, stopped smoking, and prevailed upon nine other family members to run one of the many events.

Wagar has since ran many marathons and ultra marathons, yet he says his greatest achievement is showing others that they are far more capable than they give themselves credit for. “I am an average Joe struggling through life just like everyone else. Who would have ever thought a person could run 100 miles? Now that I’ve done it, maybe someone else will look at that, get off the couch and consider a 5K someday.”

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Consider the following scenario:

You’re running around at the office and you didn’t take the time to pack a lunch. Conveniently, there’s a Burger King right down the street. You’ve managed to scrounge up \$6 between what’s in your coin purse and some change you found at the bottom of your desk drawer (along with some lint, a lost button and a tongue depressor ... where did that come from?).

You’re at the drive-thru and it’s between: the Whopper Jr.—hold the cheese and mayo—and a small size fries (700 calories, 28 grams fat, 60 grams of carbohydrates, 1260 mg sodium) or your second favorite: the chicken sandwich and onion rings (1,090 calories, 62 grams of fat, 100 grams carbohydrates, 2090 mg sodium).

But you’re not thinking of calories, fat and salt. You’re thinking of the savory, beefy aroma escaping from the building’s exhaust system like great plumes of meaty, greasy goodness. You smell fries, onion rings and apple pies. It’s as if they have those vents emitting awesome aromas on purpose, and you swear you could smell them at least a block away.

At any rate, you decide to go all out today. Chicken sandwich, onion rings and a DIET soft drink.

You think little for the rest of the day about the fact that just at lunch you consumed over half of your day’s allotted 2,000 calories (the average amount recommended for healthy adults).

In that one meal, you nearly hit your daily fat allowance of 65 grams, and you neared the Mayo Clinic’s maximum recommendation of 1,500 to 2,500 milligrams of sodium a day.

Like many things in life, eating right requires balance and a little know-how.

Sometimes it takes awhile for people to figure out they aren’t craving the Whopper Jr., but instead are craving the short-lived euphoria brought on by a rush of simple carbs, sodium, sugar and

fat. They feel the need to reward themselves with something that makes them feel good, even if it’s a quick high of sorts, and even though the food itself can be quite damaging physically.

While it’s very easy to forget to pack a lunch, try stocking a special drawer at work and home with emergency food that is healthier and just as satisfying as any double burger value meal.

Satisfying, sweet, savory and quick, here are some editor’s picks of good office and home food items perfect for busy families:

**Trail mix:** Look for mixes with raw nuts, little or no added salt, and dried fruits. They last a long time, and a handful satisfies a sweet tooth, a craving for crunch and a yen for salt.

**Cans of low-sodium soup:** Soup can be a satisfying lunch or midday snack. Make sure to read the ingredients and find brands that don’t include monosodium glutamate or list salt as one of the first few ingredients. Even better, go vegetarian and avoid the salt and fat trap of preserved beef and pork.

**Unbuttered popcorn:** While it sounds boring and bland, unbuttered popcorn is a quick, easy, simple snack. Try adding cayenne for an extra, spicy kick.

**Bananas:** A heart-healthy superfood, bananas are satisfying, highly portable and affordable.

**Dark chocolate:** Rich in antioxidants, look for chocolate with a high amount of cocoa (*see our article about chocolate on Page 38*).

**Edamame:** You’ll probably want to keep these in your freezer at home or in your office’s breakroom fridge, but these beans are a powerful, heart-healthy snack that can be nuked in under three minutes or steamed on the stove in under five. **i**

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