

WHAT IS RISK?

Making Sense of Cardiovascular Risk

WHAT IS RISK?

A probability.
It's the chance that something might – or might not – happen.

WHAT ABOUT CARDIOVASCULAR RISK?

Your clinician can gather information to estimate how likely (or not) you are to develop heart or blood vessel problems. This is called your cardiovascular risk. Based on a number of factors, including your age, blood pressure, cholesterol, body weight and how active you are, your risk of having heart disease may be:

- Low
- Intermediate
- High

Many other factors are also considered. If you already have heart disease, there are ways to gauge how likely you are to have a heart attack, stroke, or other heart problem and how to reduce your risks. **Understanding your risk of new or worsening heart disease can help you and your health care team come up with a plan to lower your risk of heart problems as much as possible.**





What risk statements might sound like:

- Type 2 diabetes increases the odds that you will develop or die from heart disease.
- High blood pressure makes the heart work harder and can cause the heart muscle and vessels to stiffen, increasing the risk of stroke, heart attack and heart failure.
- Smoking ups the chance that blockages will form in the heart's arteries, which can lead to heart attack.
- How you live your life today – your daily food choices, how much you exercise, if you are overweight – affects your risk of heart disease, heart attack, stroke or dying early.

Risk is not a guarantee that something will happen. It's the possibility that it could based on what we know. Think about a weather report. It might say there is a very good chance of rain, but sometimes it doesn't rain. Other times, there is no rain predicted, but it rains anyway. That's because there are always factors we might not know about. The same is true in medicine.

WHY SO MANY NUMBERS?

Risk is about probabilities. That means you may hear a lot of numbers. Be sure to ask your clinician to help explain these numbers.

	What you might hear	What it means, more simply
Risk of developing disease X	The risk of developing disease X is 25 percent.	 <p>1 out of 4 people like you will develop disease X.</p>
Risk of having a heart attack or stroke	Your risk of having a heart attack or stroke in the next 10 years is 9%.	 <p>Of 100 people very similar to you, 9 will likely have a heart attack or stroke in the next 10 years, 91 will not.</p>
Risk of having a procedure	The risks of the procedure are “very small.”	<p>But what does “small” mean? Each person has a different threshold for risk and how much they are willing to accept.</p> <p>For example, does stroke happen in 1 out of 100 people who have the procedure, or 1 out of every 1,000?</p>

WHAT ARE CARDIOVASCULAR RISK FACTORS?

Risk factors are conditions or health behaviors that can make heart disease or stroke more – or less – likely. Some examples include:

- Not getting enough exercise
- Being overweight or obese
- Poor diet with foods high in sugar, sodium and unhealthy fats, not enough fruits, vegetables and whole grains
- High cholesterol
- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Smoking or too much alcohol
- Older age
- Family history or genetics
- Stress
- Where someone lives and what they have access to (health care, places to exercise, fresh fruits and vegetables, etc.)

Other medical conditions can make heart disease more likely or worse. For example:

- Sleep apnea
- Kidney disease
- Certain cancer treatments
- High blood pressure or diabetes during pregnancy, early menopause
- Lupus, rheumatoid arthritis and other conditions ongoing swelling, inflammation

If you already have heart disease, many of these can make your condition worse.

What can I do?

Risk?!

Am I OK?

The Emotional Side of Heart Risks

Risk is not just about the numbers or medical advice. Many people feel risk.

Risk discussions can trigger some strong emotions:

- Fears
- Uncertainty about the future (life vs death)
- Denial
- Anger
- Concerns that not enough can be done to change your risk for the better and how it might affect your life and family

Be sure to share your feelings, including how much stress you are under.

WHAT SHOULD I BE ASKING ABOUT RISK?

Talking about your risk of having heart problems – or even dying from them – can be scary. After all, your heart and blood vessels, including your arteries and veins, help deliver nutrient-rich oxygen to the rest of your body. But if you know what makes new or worsening heart troubles more likely, you can make a plan to help protect your heart health now and in the future.

Here are some questions you might ask:

- What is my personal risk of heart disease or stroke?
- How might this risk change over time?
- What steps can I take to help protect my heart health (for example, with a heart healthier diet, more exercise, medications, screenings)?
- What could happen if I don't treat my:
 - High cholesterol
 - High blood pressure
 - Diabetes
 - Smoking
- How are certain imaging tests or bloodwork used to help us understand my risk?
- What are the risks and benefits of different treatments? How likely is it that I will experience a side effect or complication?
- Knowing what you know about me and what matters to me, what would you recommend that I do to lower my risk?

Tell your health care team how much information you want. Some people want to know everything; others prefer to only know what is needed.

For more information, visit [CardioSmart.org](https://www.cardiosmart.org).