

Young at Heart

It's possible to reverse the course of heart disease

People who have diabetes are more likely to get heart disease. They are also more likely to die from a heart attack or stroke. So if you have diabetes, it is smart to take care of your heart.

You may know that diet and exercise can help prevent heart disease. There are medicines that can also help if you need them. Now there is even better news. There is build-up inside your arteries called “plaque”. This causes heart disease. Recent studies show that you can prevent this build-up. You can also reverse it!

We talked to Roger S. Blumenthal, M.D., about these studies. He directs The Ciccarone Center for the Prevention of Heart Disease at Johns Hopkins.

Up the Statins

Statins are often used to treat high levels of fat in the blood. This fat in the blood is called cholesterol. Statins may cut back on how hard and narrow your arteries get. “Atherosclerosis” is when your arteries get hard; it leads to heart problems and strokes.

People in the study took a high dose of a statin for two years. The dose was 40 milligrams a day. LDL (“bad”) cholesterol fell by more than half. HDL (“good”) cholesterol went up 15 percent. And the amount of plaque in the arteries went down.

This is great news, says Blumenthal. You can lower the amount of plaque in your arteries. Talk to your doctor about your heart disease risk. If your cholesterol is high, ask if taking a statin would help.

Change Your Lifestyle

You can also reverse heart disease by changing your health habits. This was shown in a study led by Dean Ornish, M.D. One group got the usual care for hardening of the arteries. That included drugs to cut cholesterol. The other group didn't take these drugs. Instead, they:

- ate a very low-fat vegetarian diet
- quit smoking
- reduced stress
- exercised regularly

After one year, most people in the second (lifestyle) group had less plaque in their arteries. But, plaque went up in the other group.

Blumenthal says that the Ornish approach does work. But, it has not been endorsed by leading heart groups. That's because most people find it hard to stick with the strict diet.

Know Your ABCDEs

Blumenthal helped come up with a broad plan to manage and prevent heart disease. The plan is known as "ABCDE."

A is for antiplatelet therapy. When blood platelets clump together and form clots, these clots can clog arteries. [Daily aspirin](#) keeps blood from clotting. Read more at: <http://www.onetouch.com/articles/healthyheart>.

B is for:

- beta-blocker drugs (to treat abnormal heart rhythms)
- blood pressure control

Keep blood pressure below 130/80 mm/Hg. This goal comes from the American Diabetes Association (ADA).

C is for:

- cholesterol treatment

- cutting out cigarettes

The ADA's goal for LDL ("bad") cholesterol is less than 100 mg/dL.

D is for:

- diabetes management
- diet

The ADA suggests that A1C (a measure of diabetes control) be 7 percent or less. The DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet helps bring down blood pressure. It is low in salt. It is high in produce and low-fat dairy products. To learn more, see "[Hardening of the Arteries: Some Hard Facts](http://www.onetouch.com/articles/hardarteries)" (<http://www.onetouch.com/articles/hardarteries>).

E is for exercise. Try a brisk half-hour walk each day.

Women and Heart Disease

Men and women have different risk factors for heart disease. These factors matter more to women:

- metabolic syndrome
- stress and depression
- smoking
- low levels of estrogen before menopause

The features of metabolic syndrome include:

- a large waist
- high triglycerides
- low HDL ("good") cholesterol
- high blood pressure
- high blood sugar

Men and women can have different heart attack symptoms as well. Men often have chest pain. Women are just as likely to have:

- neck, shoulder or upper back discomfort
- shortness of breath

- nausea or vomiting
- sweating
- lightheadedness or dizziness
- unusual fatigue

Act now to cut your risk of heart disease. If you have heart disease, you can control it. You may even be able to reverse it.

Top Tips to Keep Your Heart Healthy

1. **See a heart specialist.** Work together to develop a heart-health program you can live with for the long term.
2. **Know your cholesterol levels.** Ask your doctor how to lower it if it's too high.
3. **Control your blood pressure.** A low-salt diet, exercise and stopping smoking can all help.
4. **Track your diabetes.** Test your blood sugar levels at home. Know your targets.
5. **Move more.** Make physical activity part of your daily routine.
6. **Address stress and depression.** This is very important for women.
7. **Be aware of subtle symptoms.** In women, a heart attack may cause symptoms other than chest pain. These include shortness of breath, nausea or vomiting, sweating, dizziness and extreme fatigue.

*****Authored by Johns Hopkins University and Johns Hopkins Health System*****