

Keep your heart healthy

Heart diseases have been the third leading cause of death in Hong Kong since 1960s. Among different types of heart diseases, coronary artery disease constitutes a major portion of the mortality. In 2017, about 10.6 persons on average died from coronary heart diseases per day and male have a ratio of approximately 1.4:1 to female.

Major risk factors that cannot be changed

- Increasing age
- Gender
- Heredity - Children of parents with heart disease are more likely to develop heart disease themselves.

Most people with a significant family history of heart disease have one or more other risk factors. Family history is something you cannot control, it is even more important to treat and control any other modifiable risk factors you have.

Modifiable risk factors you can modify, treat or control

- **High blood cholesterol** - As your blood cholesterol rises, so does your risk of coronary heart disease. When other risk factors (such as high blood pressure and tobacco smoke) are also present, this risk increases even more. A person's cholesterol level is also affected by age, sex, heredity, and diet.
- **High blood pressure** - High blood pressure increases the heart's workload, causing the heart muscle to thicken and become stiffer. This stiffening of the heart muscle is not normal and causes the heart to function abnormally. It also increases your risk of stroke, heart attack, kidney failure and congestive heart failure.
- **Diabetes** - Diabetes seriously increases your risk of developing cardiovascular disease.
- **Stress** - Some scientists have noted a relationship between

coronary heart disease risk and stress in a person's life. For example, people under stress may overeat, start smoking or smoke more than they otherwise would.

- **Physical inactivity** - Regular, moderate to vigorous physical activity helps reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease. Physical activity can help control blood cholesterol, diabetes, and obesity. It can also help to lower blood pressure in some people.
- **Obesity** - Especially excess body fat at the waist. For those above a healthy weight, a sustained weight loss of 3 to 5 percent of your body weight may lead to significant reductions in some risk factors. Greater sustained weight losses can improve blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood glucose.
- **Tobacco smoke** - Smoking is a powerful risk factor for sudden cardiac death in patients with coronary heart disease. Exposure to other people's smoke increases the risk of heart disease even for non-smokers.
- **Alcohol** - Drinking too much alcohol can raise blood pressure, and increase your risk for cardiomyopathy, stroke, cancer, and other diseases. It can also contribute to high triglycerides and produce irregular heartbeats.

Symptoms and warning signs

Angina - Constricting chest pain that occurs under physical exertion for example while doing exercise, brisk walking or under emotional stress. The pain gradually disappears after taking a rest. The chest pain is chest discomfort, heaviness, tightness, pressure, aching, burning, numbness, fullness, or a squeezing sensation in the chest area. It is sometimes confused with indigestion or heartburn. Angina is usually felt in the chest but may also radiate down the left shoulder and left arm



and may be felt in the neck, back or jaw.

Other common heart-attack symptoms include prolonged pain in the upper abdomen, shortness of breath, sweating, fainting, nausea, and vomiting.

Preventing heart attacks

A heart attack can occur at any age. You are never too young to start heart-healthy living. If you are over 40, or if you have multiple risk factors, work closely with your family doctor to address your risk of developing cardiovascular disease.

Heart attack prevention is critical and should begin early in life. Start with an assessment of your risk factors. Then develop a plan you can follow to maintain a low risk for heart attack. For many people, their first heart attack is disabling or even fatal. Do everything you can to lower your risk.

About the author

Dr Ivan Chow is a family medicine specialist with interest in epidemiology and biostatistics. He has passion in helping people in areas like chronic illness and mental health.