

Healthy Steps for Healthy Aging

Introduction

What comes to mind when you think of taking risks with your health - driving recklessly, or maybe abusing alcohol or illegal drugs? Those behaviors are certainly risky. However, many people have less dramatic behaviors that are just as dangerous in the long run. Tobacco use, unbalanced nutrition (too many calories and/or too much of one food group and not enough of the others) and a lack of physical activity are some of the key risk factors for the most common causes of death.

What are the most common causes of death?

Below is a list of the top 10 causes of death in the United States. Heart disease, cancer and stroke are the most common causes of death. Nearly 1.5 million people in the United States die each year from one of these diseases, or from complications of these diseases. That's more than the number of American soldiers who died in the Civil War, the Korean War and the Vietnam War combined, and it happens every year.

Top 10 Causes of Death (in order)

1. Heart Disease
2. Cancer
3. Stroke
4. Chronic lower respiratory disease
5. Accidents (many are alcohol-related)
6. Diabetes
7. Flu and pneumonia
8. Alzheimer's disease
9. Kidney disease
10. Infection

What does it mean to be at risk?

Your risk for any disease or condition depends on whether you have one or more risk factors.

Examples of risk factors include:

- **Family history.** A particular disease or health problem may run in your family. For example, diabetes runs in families.
- **Personal health habits.** Sometimes we choose habits that increase our risk for disease. For example, smoking is a harmful personal habit.
- **Age.** Your age may increase your risk for some diseases. For example, your risk for glaucoma increases after age 45.
- **Gender.** Some conditions are more common in men than in women. Other conditions are more common in women. For example, women are more likely than men to suffer from osteoporosis.
- **Race/ethnicity.** Some diseases affect people of one race or ethnic group more than others. For instance, high blood pressure is more common among blacks than among whites.

Some risk factors you can't change. You can't change your age or your race, for example. Other risk factors - especially your personal health habits - you can change. For example, you can quit smoking or start to exercise regularly. To stay healthy, it makes sense to do what you can to lower your risk for disease.

How to take charge of your health

You may ask yourself, "How do I begin to improve my health habits?" A good way to start is to set small goals instead of large ones that you won't be able to meet. For example, instead of setting a goal of losing 15 pounds in the next year, set some smaller goals for eating better and being more active. You may decide to trade your morning donut for a bowl of cereal or start taking the stairs instead of the elevator at work.

Reducing Your Risk for Heart Disease

Overall, you can reduce your risk if you:

- Maintain a healthy weight
- Eat right
- Stay physically active
- Quit smoking
- Control your blood pressure and cholesterol levels
- If you have diabetes, control your disease

Watching Your Weight

Being overweight increases your risk for heart disease, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Your doctor can tell you what you should weigh for your height.

To stay at a healthy weight, you need to balance the number of calories you eat with the number of calories you burn off by your activities. You can get to your healthy weight and stay there by doing two things: eating right and being physically active. Keep track of your weight.

Eating Right

Eating the right foods and the right amounts can help you live a longer, healthier life. Many illnesses and conditions - such as heart disease, obesity, high blood pressure, and type 2 diabetes - can be prevented or controlled by eating right. A healthy diet also provides the vitamins and minerals you need.

It is never too late to start eating right.

Keeping Active

Physical activity can help prevent heart disease, obesity, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis (thinning bones), and mental health problems such as depression. Physical activity helps you feel better overall.

What to Do

All kinds of physical activity will help you stay healthy, whether it is moderate or vigorous. It's a good idea to aim for at least moderate activity - such as brisk walking, raking leaves, house cleaning, or playing with children - for 20 to 30 minutes most days of the week. Generally, the more active you are, the healthier you will become.

How to Get Started and Keep at It

- If you have not been active, start slowly.

- Choose something that fits into your daily life.
- Choose an activity you like, or try a new one. Activities such as dancing, swimming, or biking can be fun.
- Ask a friend to exercise with you, or join a group.
- Make time in your day for physical activity. If the weather is bad, try an exercise show on TV or an exercise tape, walk in the mall, or work around the house.

Preventing Skin Cancer

Skin cancer is often preventable.

You can lower your risk for skin cancer by:

- Limiting the amount of time you spend in the sun, especially between the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m.
- Wearing sunglasses and clothing that protects against the sun - such as broad-brimmed hats, long-sleeved shirts, and long pants - when you are in the sun.
- Using sunscreen when you are in the sun. (But, don't stay out in the sun longer just because you are wearing sunscreen.)

Preventing Injury

Following basic safety rules can prevent many serious injuries. Here are two checklists to follow to help keep you and your family safe.

To help protect yourself at home:

- Use smoke detectors. Remember to check the batteries every month. Change the batteries every year. You may want to use a reminder. For example, change the batteries around your birthday or some holiday.
- Lock up guns and ammunition, and store them separately.
- Keep hallways and stairwells well lit.
- Remove or repair things that someone could trip on, such as loose rugs, electrical cords, and toys.

To help protect yourself away from home:

- Wear seat belts.
- Never drive after drinking alcohol.
- Always wear a safety helmet while riding a motorcycle or bicycle.
- Be alert for hazards in your workplace. Follow workplace safety rules.

Taking Medicines Correctly

Always be sure you know everything about a medicine before you take it. This information will help you get the full benefits from your medicine. It will also help you avoid taking too much or too little of a medicine. Taking medicine in the wrong way can make you worse instead of better.

Depression

Everybody feels "down" or "blue" sometimes. But, if these feelings are very strong or last for most of the day nearly every day for two weeks or longer, they may be due to a medical illness called depression.

The good news is that depression can be treated. You do not have to face this problem without help. Here are some warning signs of depression.

Changes in the way you feel:

- You feel sad, hopeless, or guilty most of the time.
- You feel tired or lack energy.
- You have thoughts of suicide or death.

Changes in sleeping and eating habits:

- You sleep either too much or too little.
- Your appetite has changed. You have gained or lost weight.

Changes in daily living:

- You have lost interest and pleasure in daily activities.
- You have problems making decisions or thinking clearly.

If you have had most of these symptoms for at least two weeks, you may be suffering from depression. Talk to your doctor about whether you are depressed and what you should do about it. The sooner you get treatment for depression, the sooner you will begin to feel better. The longer you wait, the harder depression is to treat.

Depression usually is treated with counseling, medicine, or both. Medicines for depression are not addicting or habit forming. They work for people with severe depression and may be useful for people with mild to moderate depression. Treatment works gradually over several weeks. If you do not start to feel better after this time, tell your doctor. It may take some time to find what works best for you.

Smoking

More than 430,000 Americans die each year from smoking. Smoking causes illnesses such as cancer, heart and lung disease, stroke, and problems with pregnancy.

When you quit, you lower your chances of getting sick from smoking.

Quitting is hard. Most people try several times before they quit for good.

When you are getting ready to quit:

- Make a plan and set a quit date.
- Tell your doctor that you want to quit smoking, and get medicine to help you quit.
- Tell your family, friends, and people you work with that you are going to quit. Ask for their support.

When you quit:

- Get support and encouragement. You may want to join a quit-smoking program.
- If you slip and smoke, don't give up. Set a new date to get back on track.
- After you quit, don't smoke - not even a puff. Try to keep yourself away from all cigarettes.

Alcohol or Drug Abuse

Abusing alcohol or drugs can cause serious medical and personal problems. Alcohol and drug abuse can lead to accidents, depression, and problems with friends, family, and work.

Drug use can cause heart and breathing problems.

Alcohol abuse can cause liver disease, heart problems, and several kinds of cancer.

Here are some suggestions about drugs and alcohol:

- Don't use illegal (street) drugs of any kind, ever.
- If you drink alcohol, limit the amount - no more than one drink a day for women and two drinks a day for men. One drink equals a 12-ounce bottle of beer or wine cooler, a 5-ounce glass of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits, such as gin, whiskey, or rum.
- Do not drink alcohol before driving or operating heavy machinery.

Hearing

Hearing loss is one of the most common health problems. Your risk for hearing loss increases after age 50.

How can you tell if you have a hearing problem? Here are some signs:

- You may have to strain to hear a normal conversation.
- You may find yourself turning up the volume of the TV and radio so loud that others complain.

If you are worried about your hearing, talk to your doctor or nurse. They may suggest a hearing test. Hearing aids can help you hear well.

Vision

People 45 and older have more vision problems than younger people, and the problems are more likely to result in accidental injuries. By age 65, you should have regular eye exams.

If you have vision problems, eyeglasses or contact lenses can improve your vision. Doctors also have other ways to improve your vision and prevent you from losing your sight. Be sure to tell your doctor if you are having trouble with your vision.

High Blood Pressure

High blood pressure can lead to heart disease, stroke, and kidney disease. It is most common in black persons and persons older than 45.

Being active and eating a healthy diet are two ways you can keep your blood pressure under control. Some people need to take medicine to keep their blood pressure at healthy levels. If you take medicine, be sure to talk to your doctor about how to take it. Do not skip any doses of medicine.

High Cholesterol

Too much cholesterol can clog your blood vessels and is a major cause of heart disease. To help lower your cholesterol and keep it at a healthy level, eat the right foods, maintain a healthy weight, and be physically active. Your doctor or nurse may suggest you take medicine to lower your cholesterol.

You should start having your cholesterol checked if:

- You are a man 35 or older.
- You are a woman 45 or older.
- You are a man between the ages of 20 and 35 or a woman between the ages of 20 and 45, and you have other risk factors for heart disease. Other risk factors are tobacco use, diabetes, high blood pressure, or a family history of heart disease.

Most experts recommend checking your cholesterol every 5 years. Your doctor or nurse may suggest you have it checked more often, especially if your cholesterol is too high.

Diabetes

Diabetes, or high blood sugar, is a major cause of blindness, kidney disease, high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease, and amputation of the lower legs and feet. Almost all adults who have diabetes have type 2 diabetes. This type usually appears in middle age. The number of people in the United States who have type 2 diabetes is growing. Exercise, a healthy diet, and watching your weight can lower your chances of getting type 2 diabetes. If you already have diabetes, those health habits and quitting smoking can help you prevent or control many of the problems of diabetes. Your risk for type 2 diabetes increases as you get older. In the United States, almost 1 in 5 people between the ages of 65 and 74 has diabetes.

Your risk for type 2 diabetes also is higher than average if:

- You are American Indian, Alaska Native, Hispanic, or African American.
- You have a family member with diabetes.
- You are overweight.
- You had diabetes during pregnancy.
- You may want to be tested for diabetes if you have high blood pressure or high cholesterol. If you have diabetes, you may need to maintain lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels than you would if you did not have diabetes.

Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis, or thinning bones, makes your bones break easily. This condition is more common in women than in men. After women have gone through menopause, their bodies make less estrogen (a hormone that helps protect their bones). Their bones become more prone to breaking.

Half of all women past menopause will break a bone during their lives. A bone density test can help determine whether your bones are prone to breaking. If they are prone to breaking, your doctor may suggest that you take a medicine to reduce your risk for fractures.

Women who are 65 or older should be tested regularly. You should begin to be tested for osteoporosis at age 60 if you are at increased risk for fractures, for example, if you weigh less than 155 pounds.

You can reduce your risk for osteoporosis by:

- Doing weight-bearing exercises, such as walking, climbing stairs, jogging, yoga, and lifting weights.
- Getting 1,000 to 1,300 milligrams of calcium every day by eating the right foods. A cup of milk or plain yogurt has 300 milligrams of calcium. You can also take calcium pills with vitamin D if you are not getting enough calcium in the food you eat.
- Not smoking.
- Taking medicines that can help prevent osteoporosis.

Tests and Exams to Find Cancers

You can increase your chances of finding a cancer before it has spread by getting certain screening tests and exams regularly. Many cancers can be treated more easily when they are found early. The tests you get and how often you get them will depend on your age, health history, and risks, such as family history and lifestyle.

Checkups, Tests, and Shots

Teeth and Gums

Here are some simple tips to follow for dental health:

- Visit your dentist once or twice a year for checkups.
- Brush after meals with a toothbrush that has soft or medium bristles.
- Use toothpaste with fluoride.
- Use dental floss every day.
- Eat fewer sweets, especially between meals.
- Do not smoke or chew tobacco products.

Shots to Prevent Diseases

You can prevent some serious diseases by getting shots (immunizations).

Measles-mumps-rubella Shot

If you have never had a measles-mumps-rubella shot or never had measles, mumps, and rubella, you should receive at least one dose of this vaccine if:

- You are a woman and able to become pregnant.
- You were born after 1956.

This shot is especially important for women. If a pregnant woman gets rubella, she could have a miscarriage, or her baby could have birth defects.

Tetanus-diphtheria Shot

Most people need this shot every 10 years.

Flu Shots

Most people 50 or older need a flu shot every year.

You may need flu shots before age 50 if:

- You have lung, heart, or kidney disease, diabetes, or cancer.
- You are a health care worker.
- You are infected with HIV or have AIDS.

Pneumonia Shot

Everyone needs a pneumonia shot once around age 65. If you have lung, heart, or kidney disease; HIV; diabetes; or cancer, you may need this shot sooner.

Hepatitis B Shots

You should receive hepatitis B shots if:

- You've had sex with more than one partner or with someone infected with hepatitis B.
- You are a man and have had sex with a man.
- You have had any other sexually transmitted disease within the last 6 months.
- You have injected street drugs.
- You have a job that involves contact with human blood or blood products.
- You travel to areas where hepatitis B is common.

Take an Active role in your healthcare

Ask questions. If you don't understand what your doctors or nurses say, ask them to explain. Always ask about any medicines or tests they say you need. If you don't ask, they may think you have all the information you want. Let your doctors and nurses know if you need more time to ask questions about

your health. If the doctor doesn't have time that day, you may be able to talk to another doctor or nurse, schedule another appointment, or find out when you can call later to speak to someone. Some doctors and health plans have call-in lines. If you call, you can speak to an advice nurse.

Especially for Women

Menopause and Beyond

The time when your menstrual cycle stops for good is called menopause. Most women reach menopause in their late 40s or early 50s. During the years leading up to menopause, levels of two female hormones, estrogen and progesterone, begin to change. These changes signal that your body is getting ready to stop menstruating. This time leading up to menopause is called perimenopause. Most women begin perimenopause between ages 35 and 50. Perimenopause usually lasts around 5 to 7 years. You can still get pregnant during this time, so you may want to use some method of birth control.

For many women, the shifting levels of hormones during perimenopause cause physical and emotional changes. Some of these changes may be uncomfortable, but there are many ways to relieve the discomfort.

The changes could include any of the following:

- Skipped periods.
- Irregular bleeding.
- Hot flashes.
- Mood swings.
- Sleep problems.
- Painful intercourse from vaginal dryness.

If you have not had a period for at least a year, you are likely to be in menopause. At this point, your hormone levels drop, so you are no longer producing eggs. Once this happens, there is no chance of becoming pregnant.

What happens after menopause?

Women are at higher risk for some diseases, such as osteoporosis (bone thinning) and heart disease. Their bodies no longer make the estrogen that helps protect them against these diseases.

Some women also continue to have symptoms such as hot flashes and vaginal dryness.

Hormone Therapy

Hormone therapy increases the levels of the hormones estrogen, progesterone, or both in your body. If you are approaching menopause or have gone through menopause, you may be considering hormone therapy to relieve symptoms of menopause or to reduce your risk for diseases such as osteoporosis.

Hormone therapy may reduce your risk for fracture, bone thinning, and colorectal cancer. On the other hand, there is evidence that some hormone therapies may increase your risk for breast cancer, heart disease, blood clots, stroke, and gall bladder disease. For women with mild or no symptoms of menopause, the potential harms of hormone therapy may outweigh the benefits.

If you are considering hormone therapy, it is important to be well informed about these benefits and harms and how they apply to you specifically. Your doctor can help you decide.

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