

Summary sheet 4

Modifiable and non-modifiable risk factors

What is a risk factor?

A risk factor is something that increases your chance of getting a disease. The more risk factors for coronary heart disease that you have, the greater your chance of getting the disease.

What are the risk factors for coronary heart disease?

Some risk factors are called **modifiable**, because you can do something about them. There are other risk factors, called **non-modifiable**, which you can't change. However, many non-modifiable risk factors can be controlled and their effect reduced by making changes to your lifestyle.

What are the modifiable and non-modifiable risk factors?

Modifiable risk factors include:

- high blood pressure (see Summary sheet 7)
- physical inactivity (see Summary sheet 8)
- smoking (see Summary sheet 10)
- diabetes (see Summary sheet 11)
- high blood cholesterol (see Summary sheet 12b)
- being overweight (see Summary sheet 13).

The good news is that the *effect* of many risk factors can be changed (you cannot change the risk factor, only its effect). The effect of these modifiable risk factors can be reduced if you make lifestyle changes.

Non-modifiable risk factors are:

- age
- ethnic background
- family history of heart disease.

Age

The older you are, the more likely you are to develop coronary heart disease, have angina or a heart attack.

Ethnic background

South Asians living in the UK are twice as likely to develop coronary heart disease compared to the rest of the UK population. Also, people from African Caribbean backgrounds have a higher than average risk of developing high blood pressure.

But remember that you can still reduce your risk as much as possible by controlling your other risk factors.

Family history

Your own risk of developing coronary heart disease is increased if:

- your father or brother was diagnosed with the disease, or had a cardiac event under the age of 55
- your mother or sister was diagnosed with the disease or had a cardiac event under 65.

If you have a family history of heart disease it may help to reduce your own risk if you look at what your family member's risk factors were. Ask yourself:

- did they smoke?
- were they overweight?
- did they have a diet high in saturated fat?
- did they take any exercise?
- did they have diabetes?

If the answer is yes to one or more of these, then you can reduce your risk by making sure your lifestyle is not the same as theirs.

Some risk factors, such as being overweight, are sometimes related to lifestyle habits that are passed on from one generation to the next. However, it's also likely that **genes** are responsible for passing on the risk of coronary heart disease. Genes can also pass on other conditions such as high blood pressure or high cholesterol levels. Both of these conditions increase the risk of getting coronary heart disease.

Is stress a risk factor for coronary heart disease?

Stress is not considered to be a direct risk factor for coronary heart disease as we are not sure how it affects the development of the disease. However, the way that you deal with stress can encourage less healthy behaviour, such as smoking, drinking too much alcohol, and overeating. These can all increase your risk of developing coronary heart disease.

For more information

bhf.org.uk

BHF Heart Helpline: 0300 330 3311 – for information and support on anything related to heart health.

This service is available in English only. Phone lines open 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday, similar cost to 01 or 02 numbers.

BHF DVDs:

Risking it (English soundtrack and subtitles)

Living to prevent heart disease (aimed at South Asians, in English and five South Asian languages)

BHF booklets:

Looking after your heart (aimed at South Asians, in English and five South Asian languages)

Keep your heart healthy (in English, Polish & Welsh)

To order these *free* resources, call the **BHF Orderline** on **0870 600 6566**