

# The Hidden Costs Of Heart Disease: An Ounce Of Prevention Is Worth A Pound Of Dollars

Heart disease may be the biggest problem American society faces. It's the leading cause of death among adults, claiming 611,000 lives each year. Nearly 25% of U.S. deaths are attributable to this silent killer.

As if that wasn't bad enough, heart disease is also a serious expense. Nearly 26.6 million people in America are diagnosed with heart disease annually. This diagnosis results in 2 million in-patient procedures and 3.7 million overnight stays in the hospital, with the average length of these stays being 4.6 days.



If you've never had cause to see how expensive it is to spend a night in the hospital, count yourself lucky. For those who need extended care for heart disease, the costs can add up quickly. After various diagnostics, medications, and even heart surgery, an episode with heart disease can end up costing \$50,000 or more!

These costs take their toll. Unpaid medical bills are still the leading costs that lead to bankruptcy in America. Health insurance is only a partial solution to this problem. As many as 10 million adults with year-round health insurance will still be forced to file bankruptcy due to medical bills. Another 35 million will be contacted by a collection agency about a medical bill, while 15 million will use up all their savings to pay for medical care.

Given these staggering statistics, preventing heart disease is one of the best investments you can make in your future. While some causes of heart disease are genetic, family history represents only part of the contributing factors toward heart disease. Behavioral changes can seriously reduce your risk of this life-threatening (and expensive!) disease.

If you want to tackle heart disease, here are 5 steps you can take to keep those medical bills at bay:

## 1.) Quit smoking

If you currently smoke, quitting today is the single greatest step you can take to prevent heart disease in your future, since cigarette smoking is the single greatest risk factor for heart disease in people under age 50. Nicotine prevents absorption of HDL (good) cholesterol, raising the level of LDL (bad) cholesterol. It also hardens arteries and increases blood pressure, both of which are

linked to increased risk of heart disease. Almost one in three deaths from heart disease are attributable to smoking. It doesn't matter what you smoke, either. Cigars, cigarettes, and "e-cigarettes" all contain the same chemical: nicotine. The same is true for smokeless tobacco in all its forms. That chemical is the cause of the negative health effects described above. Quitting is hard, but nicotine withdrawal is 100% survivable. Heart disease is far less so.

## **2.) Increase your fiber intake**

Fiber does three things for your heart. First, it makes you feel "full," which decreases the number of calories you consume. This contributes to weight loss, improves circulation, and lowers risk of heart disease. Second, because it's indigestible, it lowers your blood sugar. Lower blood sugar concentrations help prevent arterial hardening, another contributor to heart disease. Finally, high fiber concentrations help clear out your arteries, pushing out concentrations of arterial plaque that can cause heart disease. A recent study found that insoluble fiber (the kind in vegetables and beans) reduces the risk of heart disease dramatically, and doesn't have a diminishing return. The more fiber you get, the healthier your heart.

## **3.) Get some exercise**

Much like diet, your level of exercise does a lot to influence your overall health. You don't have to be a regular gym rat or develop an obsession with long-distance running to see the benefits, either. A new review of medical literature suggests that 30 minutes of accumulated activity a day is enough to see benefits. That could be six 5-minute walks around your office floor, or two 15-minute sessions chasing your pet around the yard. Even taking public transportation instead of driving somewhere can get you some time out walking to improve your health.

## **4.) Practice good stress-management**

Stress is one of the biggest contributors to high blood pressure. Ideally, you could live in a no-stress world, but bills won't pay themselves! Instead of eliminating stress from your life, work on developing techniques to manage it. Practice positive self-talk, where you encourage yourself to tackle the challenges you face. Make time to engage in activities you enjoy, like reading or card games. Practice daily relaxation, giving yourself five minutes to do nothing but unwind. Finally, find ways to immediately unplug from a stressful situation, like counting to ten before you speak or breaking impossible tasks down into smaller pieces. You won't just feel better. You'll live longer.

## **5.) Get regular check-ups**

Despite all the good habits in the world, you may still have some risk of heart disease. Getting regular check-ups from a doctor can help detect these early. Early detection can mean less costly and more effective solutions. Instead of a surgical repair to a ruptured or weakened artery, a blood pressure medication may help prevent the worst damage. Physical therapy can help promote circulation to the extremities, curtailing peripheral artery disease (PAD). These are all things a doctor can detect. By getting regular checkups, you can show your doctor a better

picture of your overall cardiovascular health, which will improve his or her ability to recommend treatments.

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