



## *A Healthy Heart:*

# A Guide for Everyone

By Arie Szatkowski, M.D., FACC

Stern Cardiovascular Center

Yearly, men and women die of heart related causes nine times more than every cancer death combined. Despite a 25 % reduction in death from heart disease and stroke over the last 25 years, Heart Disease still remains the number one killer of men and women in the United States. That means that every single American man and woman is at risk for developing a heart condition and dying from this heart condition. Interestingly most of the progress has been made because of improvements in diagnosis and treatment, not because of preventive practices. Many people continue to expose themselves to important behavioral risks thus preventing further progress from being made. Most of us make changes to our lives when it is too late and many of us believe that once we have heart disease it is too late to make a change. The time to make that change is now, even if you have heart disease.

Prevention of heart disease, improving ones quality of life and prolonging lifespan is a lifelong endeavor. You may not be able to change your genetics or age but there are heart disease prevention steps you can take. Because we are all always at some risk it is imperative that you treat your one chance at life with the utmost respect and care for your body and health, unless of course it just doesn't matter to you. I have met many people in my profession and I can confidently say that even the most stoic human beings have a change in attitude when they are faced with death; they suddenly wished they had never smoked or ate a few less barbecue sandwiches. So, for those of you who want to know what you can do to improve your chances I suggest you read on.

Steps that lead to a healthier heart:

1. **Never smoked or quit smoking at least for a year (and of course don't go back to it).** Your risk of having a stroke, heart attack, losing your limbs from hardening of the arteries or other complications like inability to have an erection increases significantly if you smoke or have ever smoked. Among other complications of smoking, this habit is the leading cause of emphysema and lung cancer. Quitting is not easy but thinking about it and wanting to quit is the first step. If you fail or have failed to quit try and try again. Most don't quit the habit until after several attempts have been made. Talk to your doctor about medical options available to you. Also go to these helpful websites for some tips. [www.Webmd.com](http://www.Webmd.com); [www.smokefreegov.com](http://www.smokefreegov.com); [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).
2. **A healthy body mass index (BMI) which is 18.5 to 24.9.** This measurement, based on your weight and height, is an estimation of whether you are underweight, normal, overweight, or obese. You can calculate your BMI on the internet. A BMI greater than 25 is considered overweight and greater than 30 is obese; above 35 and you are morbidly obese. Achieving and maintaining a healthy BMI is no easy feat but goals can be set and progress can be made if discipline and the will to succeed are in you. A combination of activity and smart eating will help you get there. I recommend the **Mayo Clinic Diet Book**, **Dr. Louis Arrone's "The Skinny"** or **Dr. Mehmet Oz's recent diet book**. These are all new, up to date, and easy to read with some very helpful information. Abdominal waist circumference coupled with your BMI may be a more accurate means of assessing the health of your body weight and size. For more information go to [www.cdc.gov/healthyweight](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight).
3. **Maintain regular physical activity.** This does not mean walking around at work or loading trucks. This means at least continuous, moderate-intensity (brisk walking) exercise for 150 minutes per week (30-45 minutes; 5days/week) or 75 minutes of vigorous physical activity (cycling, running, and spinning) weekly. The more you do the better it is for you. The benefits of exercise are numerous. Don't use lack of time as an excuse; there are ways to make the time. Be creative. Use your lunch break to walk briskly for 30 minutes, go up and down stairs and eat your lunch quickly afterwards. Spend the weekend with your family doing activities that keep everyone moving. For more help on how to get started as well as activities you can employ in your life go to [www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com). **You don't have to exercise strenuously to achieve benefits, but you can see bigger benefits by increasing the intensity, duration and frequency of your workouts.**
4. **Maintaining a blood pressure below 120/80 mmHg.** Above the age of 55 the systolic (top) number carries more weight; below the age of 55 the diastolic (lower) number is more relevant. Regardless, they are both important and for every 10 mmHg your blood pressure is above normal systolic or diastolic your risk of stroke and heart attack doubles. For instance if you are walking around with a blood pressure of 160/90 mmHg your risk is 16 times greater than someone with normal blood pressure; if it's 170/90 it is 32 times greater and so on. You should have your blood pressure checked at least once a year but every time you visit your doctor. It should never be checked immediately; you should always sit and rest for 3-5 minutes before inflating the cuff. Bottom line is if your BP is not less than 130/80 then you and your doctor are NOT doing a good enough job to minimize your risk. The first place to start is with your

*Continued on next page*

doctor. For more information visit [www.americanheartassociation.com](http://www.americanheartassociation.com). If you check it yourself at a pharmacy or at home remember to wait a few minutes before activating the cuff. Also go to [www.nhlbi.nih.gov/hbp/index.html](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/hbp/index.html) for an excellent overview and guide on high blood pressure.

5. **Fasting Blood Glucose less than 100 mg/dl or a Hemoglobin A1C less than 6.1.** Diabetes is strongly linked to heart disease. In fact, in medicine we consider the presence of diabetes equivalent to a heart attack. That's because 85% of people with diabetes die of heart attack, stroke or complications of arterial disease. Diabetes is rapidly increasing in prevalence in our society as obesity and inactivity have grown to epidemic proportions. Unfortunately our society has become increasingly complacent as we spend more time in front of the television and ingest foods that are processed and filled with carbohydrates and saturated fats. The solution to this problem starts at home where parents, like me, responsibly teach our children the importance of healthy eating habits and daily activity. If we as a society do not actively engage our children then they will someday face serious medical issues. Break the cycle; take control of your child's future. Go to [www.diabetes.org](http://www.diabetes.org) for all you need to know about diabetes. I find that **Parents Magazine** provides many great ideas for activities you and your children can enjoy that will also teach them good habits for their health. If you have diabetes it is recommended that you take your diagnosis seriously and approach it intensively.
6. **Total cholesterol less than 200 mg/dl is considered optimal.** For completeness I recommend a lipid panel which should include low density lipoprotein (LDL), high density lipoprotein (HDL), triglycerides (TGA), non-high density lipoprotein (Non-HDL) and total cholesterol. The data regarding what are optimal numbers for each individual is always evolving and new guidelines will be published this year. You and your doctor should discuss your results and measures you can take to improve your numbers. Recent studies have suggested that even people who had once been considered normal may benefit from Statin drugs. Let me make something clear about Statin drugs and other agents used to treat cholesterol problems. There are side effects and potential adverse events that we physicians are

very well aware of and capable of avoiding. These therapies have been instrumental in reducing the number of deaths due to vascular disease and have prevented heart attacks and strokes. Unfortunately the buzz created by these medications is that they can cause side effects. What people need to know is that these side effects are rare, reversible and if monitored properly should pose very little threat. In return the benefits are substantial for everyone who is a candidate for these life-saving medicines especially Statin drugs such as Crestor, Zocor, Lipitor and others. What numbers should you aim for? Go to: [www.mayoclinic.com/health/cholesterol-levels](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/cholesterol-levels).

7. **Understanding and eating a healthy diet.** There is some controversy as to what the optimal diet for fueling and maintaining a healthy heart is. Still, it is well known that there are several societies who have a low incidence of heart disease part of which is attributed to their food consumption. The American diet is centered on carbohydrates, processed foods, saturated fats and large portions. As a result our society is becoming increasingly obese and generally unhealthy. The key components to a heart healthy diet include the following: 2000 calories or less should be consumed daily; 4.5 cups of fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables daily; at least two 3.5 ounce servings of fish per week (preferably high in omega 3 fatty acids); at least an ounce of fiber-rich whole grains per day; limiting sodium to less than 1.5 grams per day and eliminating sugar-sweetened beverages (juices). There are many resources one can go to for more information. I mentioned a few under the BMI topic. Always talk to your doctor about your diet; some diseases require diets that are particularly better suited for those diseases. You can look at [www.heart.org/MyLifeCheck](http://www.heart.org/MyLifeCheck) to assess your cardiovascular risk and also be provided with recommendations to improve your heart health. Also go to [www.mayoclinic.com/health/heart-healthy-diet/nu0996](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/heart-healthy-diet/nu0996) for some helpful information about appropriate diet.
8. **Drink alcohol in moderation (preferably red wine).** This means no more than 2 drinks for a man 65 years and younger and no more than 1 drink daily for women and men 66 years or older. There is proven reduction in heart disease and dying from a heart attack with moderate consumption, but

as your consumption increases so does your risk of several cancers, stroke, pancreatic inflammation, high blood pressure and the benefits disappear. Talk to your doctor about this topic and make sure that the medicines you are taking do not interact adversely with even moderate alcohol consumption. In addition some people should never drink alcohol if he/she has liver or pancreatic disease or has had a stroke with bleeding on the brain. Of course if you don't drink I am not encouraging you to start. Grape juice which contains flavanoids may be an alternative to alcohol. Recent data shows that red and purple grape juice can reduce LDL cholesterol, lower blood pressure and reduce risk of blood clots.

In summary, heart disease is the most prevalent public health problem we are faced with in this country. 500, 000 men and women die from complications of heart disease annually. Since every single American is at risk it is recommended that each individual learn his/her risks and then implement changes to reduce and improve upon the risks. You should reassess your risk annually. If you would like to schedule a risk assessment please call 901-271-4192 and schedule a Vascular Screening and Risk Assessment with The Stern Cardiovascular Center.

Becoming heart healthy requires that you incorporate all the above mentioned steps. It is not good enough if you exercise daily but continue to smoke and eat fast food. Try to incorporate all of the tips I provided; the more you adopt the better your chances for a heart healthy and happy life. You don't have to take on everything at once but start somewhere. Each time you've incorporated something good in your life move on to the next healthy habit. And, always discuss your plans with your doctor because it takes a team effort to be successful. Good luck! **WG**

### About the Author

Arie Szatkowski, M.D., FACC is Board Certified in Internal Medicine and Cardiology. He received his M.D. from Cornell University Medical College in New York. Dr. Szatkowski completed his Cardiology Fellowship, as well as, internship and residency in Internal Medicine at New York Presbyterian Hospital, Columbia University in New York. In 2000, he was named "Physician of the Year". Also, while in his residency, Dr. Szatkowski earned the prestigious Arnold P. Gold Award for Excellence in Humanism and Teaching and was appointed Chief Fellow in Cardiology. Dr. Szatkowski joined the Stern Cardiovascular Center in July, 2003. Dr. Szatkowski's interests include: Clinical Cardiology, Congestive Heart Failure, Valvular Disorders, Adult Congenital Disease, Coronary Artery Disease and Preventive Cardiology. He also offers Nuclear Cardiology and Clinical Echocardiography including Transesophageal Echocardiography. Dr. Szatkowski is on the staff of Baptist Memorial, Saint Francis and Methodist hospitals. 901-271-1000