

Does Heart Disease Run in Your Family?

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If your mom or dad had a heart attack, you might wonder if that's going to happen to you, too. But your family's history doesn't have to become your future. You can do a lot to protect your ticker.

It's true that you're more likely to get heart disease if it runs in your family. Yet it's only part of the puzzle.

"Your genes shouldn't scare you," says New York cardiologist Jagat Narula, MD, PhD. "If you take care of the risk factors, you take care of the disease."

Ready to get started? Use this step-by-step plan.

1. Dig for Information

Just knowing that heart disease runs in your family isn't enough, because unfortunately, that's pretty common.

Your doctor will want to know who in your family had heart disease, exactly what kind they had, and how old this person was at the time.

Tell your doctor about any heart attacks and strokes, and about any heart-related procedures (such as getting stents or bypass surgery) that a relative might have had at a young age. Also tell your doctor if you have a family member with a heart murmur or heart rhythm problem like arrhythmia.

Your parents, brother, or sister matter most. Large studies show that if they had heart disease, that raises your own risk a lot, says Matthew Sorrentino, MD, a preventive cardiologist at the University of Chicago Medicine.

2. Tell Your Doctor

Let her know about your family's medical background as soon as possible. She can refer you to a cardiologist for more help if needed.

Your checkups should include basic screening tests -- which include blood pressure, blood sugar, and cholesterol checks -- starting in your 20s.

You probably don't need more advanced testing, unless your family history points to a specific genetic condition, Sorrentino says.

Your doctor will also consider other things -- such as your weight, how active you are, and whether you smoke -- when she decides what would help you most.

You won't automatically need medicine. But she might start you on cholesterol or blood pressure meds at a younger age or prescribe a higher dose so that your levels improve more dramatically.

3. Lean In to Your Lifestyle

Your parents didn't just give you their genes. You likely share some of their habits, like mom's sweet tooth or dad's hours on the couch watching sports on TV.

You can't change your mother and father, but you can change your own habits. Studies clearly show that you can lower your risk when you do that. "You can overcome your genes" in that sense, Sorrentino says.

Do your parents smoke? If you do too, you can quit.

Are they active? If not, you can be the first in your family to make regular exercise a habit. Go for at least 30 minutes of moderate activity (such as brisk walking) on 5 or more days per week.

How do they eat? If they ate too much saturated fat or trans fat, think about whether you need to cut back. If they didn't get enough fiber, you can make it a point to eat more plant foods, which are great sources of fiber. Do they need to lose a lot of weight? If you do, too, ask your doctor for advice to make that happen for yourself.

You don't have to follow in your family's footsteps. Give yourself the freedom to make your own path. It will help your heart and your whole body.