

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR DOCTOR

What are my chances of developing heart disease? Diabetes raises your risk, but so does family history, cholesterol levels, blood pressure, and more.

What cardiovascular screening tests do I need? Depending on your personal risks, your doctor might suggest tests such as an EKG or a stress test.

Is my blood sugar well-controlled? An A1c test will give you an idea of your levels over the past few months.

What signs might indicate that I'm having a heart attack? Not everyone gets chest pain. Watch out for breathlessness, fatigue, nausea, and back/jaw pain as well.

Heed Your Heart

Diabetes can strain your heart. Take steps to protect it.

BY BARBARA BRODY

If you have type 2 diabetes, you should know that your heart is at risk, too. About 68% of people over 65 who have diabetes will die from some form of heart disease, and another 16% will die from a stroke. That means you should worry about your ticker just as much as your blood sugar levels.

The connection between heart disease and diabetes is strong for two main reasons, says Stacey Rosen, MD, a cardiologist at Northwell Health in New York. For starters, chronic high blood sugar harms blood vessels and accelerates atherosclerosis. “Blood vessel damage is what leads to complications of diabetes, such as blindness and kidney failure, as well as heart disease,” says Rosen, who’s also the vice president of women’s health, Katz Institute for Women’s Health, at Northwell Health.

The second issue is that many risk factors for type 2 diabetes and heart disease overlap. Being overweight, having high blood pressure, having low HDL (“good”) cholesterol, and not getting enough physical activity all increase the chances of developing both conditions.

Tipping the scales in your favor

You can, however, take steps to protect your heart. Losing weight if you need to and maintaining a healthy body mass index (BMI) will help a lot. Even shedding 10 pounds can make a big difference for managing your blood sugar levels and reducing your risk of heart disease. Rosen recommends having a nutritionist or certified diabetes educator help you devise meal plans based on your needs and preferences.

Exercise is also extremely important for heart health and diabetes management. The American Heart Association recommends at least 150 minutes per week of moderate aerobic activity, plus strength training at least twice a week. But smaller amounts of exercise can add up over the course of the day or week, says Rosen. “You don’t have to do everything perfectly; anything you do right counts,” she says. A 15-minute walk after lunch is a great start; so is lifting “weights” using soda bottles or cans of veggies.

Also, your doctor may prescribe a statin, a type of medication designed to lower cholesterol. Most people with diabetes benefit from these drugs even if their cholesterol levels seem OK, says Rosen. That’s because the diabetes-heart disease connection is so strong, and statins do more than just lower LDL (“bad”) cholesterol levels—they also stabilize plaque in the blood vessels, so it’s less likely to break off and lead to a heart attack or stroke. Your doctor can help you weigh the risks and benefits.



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