

# 7 STEPS

TO A HEALTHY HEART



## Introduction

Did you know that each year more than a million Americans die from heart disease? Even worse, African Americans die from heart disease and stroke 50% more frequently than other Americans.

Even if you don't die from heart disease or a stroke, it can spoil your quality of life.

It doesn't have to be that way. There is a lot you can do to help prevent heart disease by accessing better health care, getting regular checkups, eating right, and staying active.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOKLET

This booklet explains how you can choose a healthy lifestyle and help prevent high blood pressure, diabetes, heart attack, stroke, and other health problems.

Take a few minutes to look through this booklet. It has useful information that will help you follow the 7 Steps to a Healthy Heart:

1. Take Charge of Your Blood Pressure
2. Control Your Cholesterol
3. Track Your Blood Sugar
4. Eat Smart & Enjoy Regular Exercise
5. Reduce Stress
6. Don't Smoke
7. Access Better Health Care

At the back of this booklet, you'll find a list of resources where you can obtain, by telephone, mail, or the Internet, more information about healthy living.

Following the guidance in this booklet will help give you the inspiration and knowledge that you need to enjoy a long, healthy, and fulfilling life!

## Step 1: Take Charge of Your Blood Pressure

Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against the walls of your blood vessels. As your heart pumps blood to all parts of your body, it creates this force in your arteries and other blood vessels. If the force is too strong or if your blood vessels are constricted, you have **high blood pressure**.

High blood pressure—also called **hypertension**—is known as the “silent killer.” Most people who have it feel healthy and don't even know they have it. But if it's left untreated, high blood pressure can cause a heart attack, stroke, kidney failure, blindness, or even death.

One of the most important things you can do for your health is to get your blood pressure checked regularly. Even if you are young and feel healthy, have your blood pressure checked at least once a year. If you already have high blood pressure, you should get it checked more often. In addition to adopting a healthy lifestyle, most people who have high blood pressure also need to take medications. Your health care provider can advise you about the many effective blood pressure medications that are available.

### Measuring blood pressure

Your blood pressure measurement includes two numbers, as in a reading such as 120/80 mmHg.

- The top or higher number is the amount of pressure while your heart is pumping blood. This is the **systolic pressure**.
- The bottom or lower number is the amount of pressure when your heart rests between beats. This is the **diastolic pressure**.

A healthy blood pressure for an adult is below 120/80 mmHg.

## Step 2: Control Your Cholesterol

Monitoring your cholesterol is extremely important, because high blood cholesterol can lead to **coronary heart disease**, which is a leading cause of death.

What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance that is naturally produced and stored in the liver. It's in the cells of your brain, muscles, skin, heart, and everywhere else that your blood flows. Your body needs cholesterol to function normally, but you only need a small amount in your bloodstream.

If you have too much blood cholesterol, your body stores extra cholesterol in your arteries, including the coronary (heart) arteries. Cholesterol buildup narrows and clogs the arteries, resulting in heart disease. The higher your cholesterol level is, the greater your risk for heart disease.

### Good and bad cholesterol

There are two main types of cholesterol:

1. **LDL** is often called bad cholesterol because it lays down fatty deposits in the arteries that feed your heart and brain. Too much of it puts you at risk for heart disease and stroke.
2. **HDL** is called good cholesterol because it helps clean fat and "bad" cholesterol away from the arteries.



## Measuring blood cholesterol

Your health care provider can do a lipoprotein profile to measure your total cholesterol, HDL, and LDL levels. Starting at age 20, you should have this test at least every 5 years. Anyone with high cholesterol, diabetes, or certain other conditions should have it more often. Talk with your health care provider about how often you should have a lipoprotein profile.

If your total cholesterol or LDL levels are too high, or if your HDL level is too low, your doctor may prescribe medicine to help bring your cholesterol to a healthier level.

### Cholesterol Tests: What The Numbers Mean\*

If TOTAL cholesterol is:		
Below 200	Desirable	Great! Keep below this number.
200-239	Borderline	Make changes in your lifestyle to decrease risk of a heart attack.
240 or higher	High	Danger! Seek medical help to lower your cholesterol level.
If LDL is:		
Less than 100	Optimal	Aim for low LDL.
100-129	Near optimal	
130-159	Borderline high	
160-189	Too high	
190 or higher	Much too high	
If HDL is:		
60 or higher	Optimal	Aim for high HDL.
40-59	Borderline	
Less than 40	Too low	

\*Measurements represent milligrams per deciliter (mg/dL).

Source: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute of the National Institutes of Health, ATP III Classification.

### Step 3: Track Your Blood Sugar

Diabetes is the disease people get when their body has trouble making or using insulin, so too much sugar builds up in their blood. Having too much blood sugar is very bad for the heart, the kidneys, and other vital organs.

Diabetes is the sixth leading cause of death in the U.S., and African Americans die from diabetes 27% more often than whites! Furthermore, diabetes is a leading cause of heart attack, stroke, and other serious health problems including kidney disease, impotence, blindness, and amputations. Each year, more than 77,000 Americans who have diabetes die of heart disease!

There are two main types of diabetes: Type 1 and Type 2. People with Type 1 diabetes need to take insulin to stay alive because their bodies do not produce it. People with Type 2 diabetes either do not produce enough insulin or their cells do not properly use the insulin that is produced. Your body needs insulin in order to make energy out of the sugar you eat. Most people with diabetes have Type 2.

Regular exercise and a healthy, low-fat diet are very important for helping to prevent Type 2 diabetes. In our culture, we eat too much fatty food and we don't get enough exercise, so more and more of us are overweight, and more and more Americans are getting diabetes.

There's no cure for diabetes. If you have diabetes, however, keeping your blood sugar level under control can be a big help in preventing heart disease and other complications. That means watching your diet, exercising, controlling your weight, and taking medication if necessary.

### Testing for diabetes

Many people with diabetes don't even realize they have it until it becomes life-threatening or leads to a

serious complication. The only way to find out for sure whether you have diabetes is to have a blood test. Talk with your health care provider about whether you should have a diabetes blood test called a fasting plasma glucose test.

This test measures the amount of glucose, or sugar, in your blood on an empty stomach. Your doctor will ask you not to eat for at least 8 to 10 hours before the test. The results will fit into one of the four categories shown below.

### Fasting Plasma Glucose Test Results (mg/dL)

Healthy	Possible risk	Impaired glucose tolerance	Diabetes
Below 75	75 to 110	111 to 125	126 or higher

If your test result is 126 mg/dL or higher, you probably have diabetes.

### Managing Diabetes: A1c Tests

People with diabetes may check their blood sugar several times a day by pricking their finger, drawing a drop of blood, and using a small glucose meter to measure the sugar level in the drop of blood.

In addition to monitoring blood sugar at home, anyone with diabetes or high glucose levels should have regular health checkups that include a blood test called a **hemoglobin A1c** (A1c). If you have diabetes, expect to have the A1c test two to four times a year.

The A1c test is the best way to tell how well you are doing at controlling your glucose and insulin levels. If you get a result of less than 7%, this indicates that your blood sugar falls within the recommended guidelines. The Association of Black Cardiologists, Inc. (ABC) recommends a goal of 6.5%. Ask your doctor what results you should expect and what they mean for you.

## Prevention and control

No matter what your blood test results, your lifestyle is the key to preventing diabetes, or managing it if you already have it.

Recently, a major study showed that if you have impaired glucose tolerance, simple changes in your diet and exercise routines can prevent diabetes. In the National Institutes of Health's Diabetes Prevention Program, exercise and weight loss reduced the risk of diabetes by nearly 60% among people with impaired glucose tolerance.

Why is weight control so important for preventing or controlling diabetes? Because having too much body fat makes it harder for the body to produce the insulin it needs. This is especially true if the extra fat is above the hips, rather than on the hips and thighs. Researchers have found that this type of obesity is especially common among African Americans.



Even if you aren't obese, you can get diabetes from sitting around too much, not exercising enough, and consuming a high-calorie diet. A lifestyle that adds body fat increases your risk of diabetes, which adds to your risk of heart disease.

As you lose fat and build muscle, your body uses insulin better. And for most people, losing just a few pounds is enough to make a huge difference. In its Diabetes Prevention Program, the National Institutes of Health found that for most people, losing just 10 pounds is enough to cut the risk of diabetes by 58%!

No question, the way to prevent diabetes is to stay active, eat smart, and keep your weight down—the same things that help maintain a healthy heart.

The rest of this book will provide the tips you need to eat smart, enjoy regular exercise, manage your weight, avoid smoking, and access better health care.

## Step 4: Eat Smart & Enjoy Regular Exercise

Eating smart means eating foods that are low in fat and rich in nutrients. It means eating lots of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. And most importantly, drink plenty of refreshing water.

Eating right isn't just about living longer. It's about feeling good. It's about staying healthy and vigorous even as you age. Smart eating helps you avoid having a heart attack, stroke, high blood pressure, or diabetes. It helps to prevent suffering and increases the healthy years that lie ahead.


### Cut fat and cholesterol

Eating too much saturated fat can clog your arteries and lead to a heart attack or stroke. Saturated fat raises your "bad" cholesterol levels more than other types of fat. To reduce saturated fat in your diet, eat less butter, cheese, whole milk, lard, and fatty cuts of meat.

### Enjoy fruits and vegetables

The easiest way to cut fat and cholesterol is to fill up on your favorite fruits and vegetables. Also try to eat whole grains such as whole wheat bread, oatmeal, and whole grain cereals. Beans are also a healthful food and a good source of protein.

Try to eat at least five servings a day of fruits and vegetables. If you've ever gone on a "diet," you know that it's not easy to change how you eat. You may need support from friends or family members in your effort to change. You can also get support from your health care provider.



If you have high blood pressure, to help keep it down, eat **less sodium**. Food labels tell how much sodium is in a product. Instead of using convenience foods that are high in sodium, prepare your own meals from scratch. Try not to cook with salt. Instead, use spices, herbs, and salt-free seasoning blends.

## Enjoy Regular Exercise

If you think aging has to mean growing more sedentary or becoming disabled and useless, think again.

No matter what your age, you can continue to enjoy going out, making new friends, singing and dancing, gardening, and many other ways of staying active and having fun.

Staying physically active can lower your blood pressure and your LDL “bad” cholesterol level. It can also raise your HDL “good” cholesterol level and lower your triglycerides. It helps keep blood sugar under control to prevent the serious complications of diabetes. Exercise is also important if you need to lose weight, and it’s a wonderful way to help keep stress from overpowering you.

Every little bit of exercise helps a little bit. So, resist the temptation to take the elevator instead of the stairs or to park right next to your doorway, instead of far away, so you can walk.

## Follow an exercise plan and exercise daily

No matter what your age, try to be active for at least 30 minutes a day. You can do activities by yourself or with others. You can do 30 minutes all at once, or you can exercise two or three times a day for 10-20 minutes at a time. If you have a health problem, be sure to talk with your health care provider before starting an exercise program.

The key to a successful exercise program is to find the activities that you enjoy doing and that fit into your daily routine.

Also, talk with your health care provider about which types of exercise would be best for you. If you aren’t used to exercising, start with moderate activities and work your way up to more vigorous activities.

## Manage Your Weight

You’re not alone if you are carrying around extra pounds. Unfortunately, nearly 2 of 3 adults in the United States are overweight or obese, according to the Surgeon General’s latest report. The rates are even higher among African Americans, especially African American women. Obesity is the second leading cause of preventable death.

The most important reason to lose weight is that you’ll feel better and stay healthier. Having extra body fat can lead to a heart attack, stroke, diabetes, and other serious health problems. Losing just a small amount of weight is likely to help in several ways. Losing weight helps to:

- Lower your blood pressure (thus decreasing your risk of heart attack and stroke).
- Reduce LDL “bad” cholesterol and triglycerides (thus decreasing your risk of cardiovascular disease).
- Keep your blood sugar from rising (thus decreasing your risk of diabetes).
- Increase self-esteem.
- Decrease depression.
- Reduce your risk of arthritis.

Your genes, your environment, and emotional factors can all contribute to obesity. No matter what the causes are, it boils down to this: You are taking in more calories than you use.

**Cut calories:** To lose weight, try to eat about 300 to 500 calories less than usual each day. Women often consume about 2,000 calories a day. Most men consume closer to 2,500 calories, but calorie consumption also depends on how active you are.

### How to cut calories:

1. Choose foods that are lower in fat and calories.
2. Reduce or eliminate foods that have calories but no nutrients. That means you should eat less fat and sugar and drink less alcohol.
3. Enjoy fruits, vegetables, and whole grains—foods that have lots of nutrients and roughage.
4. Eat foods that are high in fiber. Fiber is useful for weight control because eating enough of it can help you feel full and not eat too much.
5. Eat smaller portions. Exercising or drinking a glass of water before a meal can help reduce your appetite.
6. Stick to a well-rounded diet.
7. Read the nutrition facts on food labels.

### Step 5: Reduce Stress

Stress is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, experiencing stress can be good when it's manageable. Challenge can be motivating and inspiring. Stress helps wake us up in the morning, and it motivates us to take care of our responsibilities. The stress of hard work is a good thing as long as you get satisfaction from it.



When stress becomes overwhelming, however, it can be destructive.


To avoid the frustration and depression that can come from destructive stress, you need tools to maintain your emotional strength and resilience. What are the best tools? Attend a place of worship. Have a positive attitude. Know your limits. Express your feelings to understanding friends and family members. Stay active in your community. Care for a child, or adopt a pet.

Reaching out to others is another important strategy for coping. When you reach out, you feel good about yourself and may help others as well. There are many ways to reach out. You might volunteer in the community or care for a friend or family member. Maybe you listen attentively to others' concerns. You might tutor a schoolchild, help your neighbor with a home repair, or visit someone who is ill. Pursuing hobbies that you enjoy also strengthens your ability to cope.

### Step 6: Don't Smoke

Cigarette smoking is the most preventable cause of premature death in the U.S. It accounts for more than 440,000 deaths a year. Smoking causes lung cancer, chronic bronchitis, and emphysema. Reports have shown that in persons who have stopped smoking for 5 years, their lungs heal and look almost brand new, just as if they had never smoked. The Surgeon General of the United States warns that cigarette smoking is harmful to your health and can cause death. In addition, smoking during pregnancy may cause damage to the unborn baby.

Secondhand smoke (inhaling someone else's smoke) causes 5,000 lung cancer and heart disease deaths each year. Some other reasons to stop smoking are: it makes your clothing and hair smell bad, wrinkles your skin, wastes money, stains your teeth, makes food tasteless, increases your heart rate, temporarily raises your blood pressure, and decreases oxygen to the brain.



If you smoke and want to stop, use the following tips to help you:

1. Set a date to quit.
2. Inform friends, family, and coworkers of your plan to quit and ask for their support.
3. Throw away cigarettes, matches, and lighters in your home and car.
4. Review previous attempts to quit. Try to assess why they failed and what you can do to avoid those obstacles.
5. Anticipate challenges and plan what to do instead of smoking.
6. Keep busy and have a supply of low-calorie snacks on hand.

## Step 7: Access Better Health Care

Some people are fearful of doctors and health care establishments. In some cases, the fear stems from the retelling of stories about negative experiences (real and imagined) of other people. You should not assume that your experiences will mirror those of your parents or grandparents.

You should not ignore health problems no matter how big or small. Denial will not make a problem go away.

**Take advantage of any medical benefits provided by your employer.** Everyone, no matter how healthy, should see a doctor every 1-3 years depending upon age and medical history. This will allow you to identify problems early and have more options for treatment.

**Find a health care provider you are comfortable with.** If you don't already have a health care provider that you see regularly, it's time to find one. Think of it as a partnership: You and your doctor are working on a project together, and

the project is your health. Before each visit, write down a list of the questions you have. Then, make sure you get answers to all your questions. It may be helpful to bring a friend along. If there isn't time to get all the answers you need, talk with your doctor about this. If he or she isn't responsive, it may be time to find a different health care provider.

**Identify public clinics in your community.** Take advantage of the health services they provide.

**Congratulations!** By reading this booklet, you have taken a giant step toward a healthier heart. Be encouraged even if you are finding that you need to make a lot of changes in your lifestyle. Nobody expects you to make all of these changes overnight. But remember, every little bit helps. Every step you take in the right direction will make it that much easier to take the next step.

You're not just doing this for yourself. You're taking care of yourself for your family, and for all of your loved ones. Take pride in your accomplishments.

### You deserve it!

Founded in 1974, the Association of Black Cardiologists, Inc. (ABC) is a nonprofit organization with an international membership of nearly 600 health care professionals. The ABC is dedicated to eliminating the disparities related to cardiovascular disease in all people of color. Today, the ABC's public and private partnerships continue to increase its impact in communities across the nation.

The ABC believes that good health is the cornerstone of progress. The ABC is dedicated to making exemplary health care accessible and affordable to all in need and lowering the high rate of cardiovascular diseases in minority populations. The ABC is committed to advocacy and diversity.

This guidebook is intended for informational purposes only, with the understanding that no one should rely upon this information as the basis for medical decisions. Anyone using this guidebook should consult a health care provider before starting a diet or exercise program.

The ABC has used reasonable efforts to include timely and accurate information in this guidebook. Accordingly, the Sponsor, Partners, Producers, and Author make no representations or warranties, expressed or implied, regarding the accuracy or completeness of the information provided herein and specifically disclaim any liability, expressed or implied, in connection therewith.

## RESOURCES

American Diabetes Association (ADA)  
1701 N. Beauregard Street  
Alexandria, VA 22311  
1-800-DIABETES (1-800-342-2383)  
[www.diabetes.org](http://www.diabetes.org)

American Dietetic Association  
National Center for Nutrition and Dietetics  
Information  
1-800-366-1655  
[www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)

American Heart Association  
7272 Greenville Avenue  
Dallas, TX 75231-4596  
1-800-242-8721  
[www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)

American Kidney Fund  
6110 Executive Boulevard  
Rockville, MD 20852  
1-800-638-8299  
[www.kidneyfund.org](http://www.kidneyfund.org)

American Stroke Association, a division of the  
American Heart Association  
1-888-4STROKE (1-888-478-7653)  
[www.strokeassociation.org](http://www.strokeassociation.org)

Calorie Control Council  
5775 Peachtree-Dunwoody Road, Suite 500G  
Atlanta, GA 30342  
1-404-252-3663  
[www.caloriecontrol.org](http://www.caloriecontrol.org)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)  
1600 Clifton Road  
Atlanta, GA 30333  
1-404-639-3311  
1-800-311-3435  
[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute  
NHLBI Health Information Center  
P.O. Box 30105  
Bethesda, MD 20824-0105  
1-301-592-8573  
[www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov)

National Diabetes Information Clearinghouse (NDIC)  
1 Information Way  
Bethesda, MD 20892  
1-301-654-3327  
1-800-860-8747  
<http://diabetes.niddk.nih.gov>

National Stroke Association  
9707 E. Easter Lane  
Englewood, CO 80112  
1-800-STROKES  
1-303-649-9299  
[www.stroke.org](http://www.stroke.org)





**Each year, more than a million Americans die from heart disease and stroke. African Americans die from these conditions 50% more frequently than other Americans.**

This booklet will help you take steps toward a longer, healthier, more fulfilling life. It will help you follow the 7 Steps to a Healthy Heart:

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This edition of 7 Steps to a Healthy Heart is brought to you by the Association of Black Cardiologists, Inc., which is solely responsible for the content, in partnership with NitroMed, Inc.



Association of Black Cardiologists, Inc.

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