

Women's Health

11 Bizarre Factors That Increase Your Risk Of Heart Disease

Um, whoa.

BY CHARLOTTE HILTON ANDERSEN January 31, 2018



You go for runs, limit your donut consumption, and have never smoked a cigarette. So you're probably never going to get heart disease, right?

Er, not quite.

It's true that the biggest risk factors for heart disease certainly aren't shocking: They include obesity, a lack of exercise, smoking, high blood pressure or cholesterol, a poor diet, a strong family history, and stress, according to the AHA.

But those aren't the only factors that can increase your risk of developing a blockage in your arteries, not by a long shot. It just so happens that seemingly innocuous factors like your love life, how you spent your childhood, and even the age at which you got your first period can affect your risk of heart disease. Yes, seriously.

That means, if you really want to lower your risk of heart disease, you need to pay attention not only to the "everybody knows" risk factors for heart disease, but also the bizarrely sneaky ones. (Not to scare you, but heart disease is the number-one killer of women in the world: Every minute in the U.S., one of us dies from heart disease, according to the American Heart Association.)

Here, cardiologists share the under-the-radar risks factors for heart disease that every woman needs to know.

1 YOU GOT YOUR PERIOD BEFORE AGE 12

The earlier you start puberty, the higher your risk of heart disease later on, says **Adam Splaver, M.D., a cardiologist at Nanohealth Associates in Hollywood, Florida.**

In fact, a recent *Heart* study found that women who got their first flow before the age of 12 are about 10 percent more likely to have heart disease than women who got theirs at 13 or older. (On average, women in the U.S. get their first period at age 12, according to a study in the *Journal of Pediatric Endocrinology and Metabolism.*)

The researchers didn't theorize as to why this happens, but other research has shown that increased estrogen levels (a hormone that plays an essential role in puberty) can increase your risk of blood clots and strokes over your lifetime. Talk to your doctor about healthy lifestyle habits that will help counteract this increased risk if you're concerned.

2 YOU TAKE DIET PILLS

Ladies: Most diet pills don't work. But, even worse, they could kill you. "Any pill with a stimulant effect, including most diet pills, can hurt your heart," Amber Khanna, M.D., a cardiologist at UHealth University of Colorado Hospital. "They increase your blood pressure and heart rate which puts stress on your heart. If you take them long enough, you can cause permanent damage."

Stick to proven weight-loss methods like eating a healthy diet and exercising—two things guaranteed to lower your risk of heart disease.

3 YOU'VE HAD A NASTY FLU RECENTLY

Having the flu increases your risk of a heart attack six-fold for at least a year after you've been infected, according to a new study published in *New England Journal of Medicine*. If you ever find it hard to breathe laying down and you're swollen after having a cold or flu, get to a hospital immediately, she says. Certain bacterial and viral infections can move into your heart, causing heart disease and even heart failure, Khanna says.

4 YOU'RE LONELY

Feeling lonely and socially isolated increases your risk of heart disease by 30 percent, as much as smoking does, according to a study published in the journal *Heart*.

Thankfully, this is one risk factor for heart disease that's relatively simple to take care of, **Splaver** says. His recommendations? Get off social media, join a club or group, and get a pet—not only do they provide unconditional love but walking a dog is also good exercise. Bonus: Having a pet has been shown to not only decrease loneliness, but may independently improve heart health, according to research reported by Harvard.

5 YOUR PREGNANCY WAS NO PICNIC

Growing a baby is a lot of extra work for your circulatory system, says Khanna. Your blood volume doubles and your heart has to work extra hard. That alone doesn't increase your risk for future heart disease, but if you also get gestational diabetes, preeclampsia, or have high blood pressure during your pregnancy then you're at a significantly increased risk for heart disease, even years down the road.

Always tell your doctor about any conditions you had during pregnancy, she says.

6 YOU JUST GOT DUMPED

There's a reason that we call an extremely sad event "heartbreaking," and that's because emotional distress can cause actual heart problems. It even has a name: broken heart syndrome.

"This one is hard to prevent or avoid as any deeply upsetting event can cause it, including a breakup, loss of a loved one, financial distress, a move, or a divorce," **Splaver** explains. The key isn't to avoid heartbreak (is that even an option, really?) but to have a plan with how to deal with those hard feelings using healthy coping techniques like exercise, meditation, yoga, tai chi, and therapy, he adds.

7 YOU DRINK A COUPLE GLASSES OF WINE EVERY NIGHT

There's a lot of conflicting information on the effect of alcohol on heart disease but it's safe to say that while moderate drinking—one drink or less per day—is likely fine, Khanna says. Anything more than that however, especially if you're drinking more than two servings of alcohol a day, increases your risk of heart disease, she adds.

If you're really concerned about your heart, she recommends skipping alcohol all together.

8 YOU'VE BEEN DIAGNOSED WITH AN INFLAMMATORY DISEASE

Lupus and rheumatoid arthritis have two scary things in common: They're more likely to affect women and they both increase your risk of heart disease. It all comes down to inflammation, Khanna says. Inflammation damages blood vessels, causing plaque to build up, she explains.

Talk to your doctor about your diagnosis and how you have help mediate the inflammation.

9 YOU'RE DEPRESSED

Being depressed not only increases your risk of getting heart disease, but it also doubles your risk of dying from it, according to a study presented at the American College of Cardiology's 66th Annual Scientific Session in 2017. It's not clear what exactly the connection is but people who are depressed often have higher cortisol, the stress hormone, which is linked to heart disease, Khanna says.

Depression may also make it harder to do things that reduce heart disease risk like seeing a doctor, exercising, and taking medication, she adds. Seek treatment if you've got a feeling of sadness you just can't shake.

10 YOU WERE ABUSED AS A CHILD

Talk about pouring salt in a wound: Women who experienced three or more traumatic events as a child—such as being abused, witnessing others being hurt, or being a victim of bullying—have an increased risk of heart disease as an adult, according to a study published in *Circulation*.

While experts so far have no idea why the connection exists, it's still one more reason to combat emotional scars head-on, researchers explain.

11 YOU'RE BEING TREATED FOR ADHD

The most commonly used medications used to treat attention-deficit hyperactive disorder are stimulants and these drugs can increase your heart rate and blood pressure, putting extra strain on your heart, **Splaver** says. While more research needs to be done in this area, one study published in *The BMJ* found that long-term use of ADHD medications slightly increased the risk of heart disease in children.

Talk to your doctor about weighing your potential risks and benefits from these meds.