

Heart Health: The What, Why & How

By Ryan Harrison, MA

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With heart disease on the top 5 list of killer diseases in the Western world, it's no wonder that people are so concerned with figuring out what heart disease is and how to stop it. With this disease, as with many others, it's easier to prepare and prevent than to repair and repent! But if you don't even know what heart disease *is*...well, this article is for you.

The What

The term "heart disease" is a catch-all of sorts. In general, it refers to any disorder of the heart. Under this broad umbrella come several more specific ailments such as coronary heart disease, congenital heart disease, pulmonary heart disease, hypertension, arrhythmias, etc. According to the American Heart Association (AHA), every 33 seconds an American dies from some sort of heart disease. That calculates to about 954,000 deaths annually or 42% of all mortalities. And that's just in the U.S.!

Heart disease, with all its many tendrils, is a big problem.

The Why

Typically, cholesterol gets the blame for causing heart disease. People have been told for years that too much cholesterol in the blood ends up with a narrowing or hardening of the blood vessels. Make no mistake – this certainly happens! But not all cholesterol is bad. In fact, your body actually *makes* some cholesterol because it needs it to repair cells, manufacture key male and female sex hormones, and keep the immune system running smoothly.

You may have heard of "good" cholesterol and "bad" cholesterol. These are laymen's terms for high-density lipoproteins (HDLs) and low-density lipoproteins (LDLs), respectively. Physicians determine cholesterol levels in the blood by measuring your ratio of HDLs to LDLs. Testing for cholesterol levels allows them to determine how effectively your body is metabolizing cholesterol and how much is left in the blood stream.

Here's the scoop on HDL and LDL cholesterol. LDLs are often labeled the "bad" cholesterol, because they appear to leave fat deposits on the walls of your arteries, causing damage to them. These deposits may narrow the arteries to the point where blood has a hard time flowing, or may even break off and flow into the heart or other parts of the body, causing heart attacks and strokes. On the other hand, HDLs are often called "good," because high levels are associated with lowered risk of heart disease and evidence suggests that they actually help remove LDLs from the body.

What's more, according to cardiologist W. Lee Cowden, M.D., LDL cholesterol only becomes harmful when it is oxidized (the result of oxygen combining with a substance).¹ And this

happens when it is exposed to free-radical substances such as homocysteine (a hormone released during stress), chlorine from unfiltered tap water, etc. What this means is that many of us are oxidizing the LDL cholesterol in our blood on a daily basis.

Medicine-as-usual doesn't even consider oxidized versus non-oxidized LDL. Rather, prescription medications for lowering cholesterol levels are written and filled. Indeed, with the rising incidence of high cholesterol and heart disease, cholesterol-lowering drugs have become quite the money-makers for pharmaceutical companies. Unfortunately, such medications have their own set of nasty side effects, and while they may lower blood pressure or cholesterol levels, they may also contribute to a decline in health in other ways.

The How

One of the startling things about heart disease is that, despite the fact that it's one of the Western world's leading killers, it's also the most preventable. What that means is that if you're healthy today, you don't have to suffer from heart disease tomorrow. And if you're currently struggling with heart disease, there are steps you can take to start healing.

Few people are aware of the natural alternatives to prescription medications. Yet holistic health practitioners from reflexologists to craniosacral therapists will invariably have a litany of ways you can keep heart disease at bay. Here are a few approaches to heart health that you can implement immediately:

- **Vitamin C** – As little as 1 gram (1,000 mg) of vitamin C a day can significantly lower blood pressure. This celebrity among vitamins helps keep artery walls intact and also encourages HDL cholesterol to carry LDL cholesterol out of the bloodstream.²
- **Vitamin E** – Studies have shown that as little as 100 IU of this vitamin can reduce the risk of heart attack, especially if given before the problem develops.
- **Exercise** – A little goes a long way. Walking briskly for 30-45 minutes daily can lower your risk of heart disease by encouraging weight loss, reducing blood pressure and LDL cholesterol, and boosting HDL levels.
- **Relax** – Stress and heart disease go hand in hand. Research shows that people who get irritated or angry easily and frequently have nearly twice the risk of developing heart disease as compared to people who are more easy going and only get angry for good reason (such as being treated unfairly or unduly criticized). Find a stress reduction therapist or take up breathing exercises as a way to calm and center yourself when you feel your stress rising dangerously out of control.
- **Herbal Remedies** – Herbs are nature's medicine chest and many herbs can be used successfully to help prevent and treat heart disease. Hawthorn berry, for example, is a wonderful herb for heart conditions. It improves the circulation of blood, dilates blood vessels, and relieves spasms of the arterial walls. Consult a qualified herbalist to discuss herbal remedy options.

Obviously, the healthier a lifestyle you live, the better you will be at preventing heart disease. For more information on what kinds of alternative health treatments are available to help you

prevent and recover from heart disease, contact a qualified holistic health practitioner. Find one who will work with your physician in determining what alternative treatments are right for you.

¹ The Burton Goldberg Group. *Alternative Medicine: The Definitive Guide*, 2nd ed., “Heart Disease”, Celestial Arts Publishing; Berkeley, CA; © 2002.

² Holford, Patrick. *The New Optimum Nutrition Bible*, The Crossing Press, © 2004.