



Preeclampsia: a screening test for heart disease

Heart disease is the leading cause of death for women and it is increasing in women aged 35 to 54 years. Women who have had preeclampsia have approximately double the risk for heart disease and stroke over their next five to 15 years. That risk increases if preeclampsia occurred in more than one pregnancy or if the baby was small. For some women the stress of pregnancy on the body can possibly expose underlying health issues.

Many of the risk factors for preeclampsia, high blood pressure and heart diseases are the same. These risk factors include being overweight, problems with blood clotting, diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure or having a family history of those conditions.

What can I do to reduce my risk for heart disease?

If you had preeclampsia, you should take extra care to monitor the health of your heart, see your healthcare provider regularly and make lifestyle modifications now to reduce your risk. If you have other risk factors in addition to your history of preeclampsia, these steps become even more important.

Talk to your healthcare provider about your pregnancy history

2011 guidelines from the American Heart Association and 2013 guidelines from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists encourage assessment of a woman’s pregnancy history. You should let your healthcare providers know:

- How many pregnancies have you had?
- Did you have preeclampsia (or high blood pressure)?
- Did you have gestational diabetes?
- How many miscarriages or stillbirths?
- Were any of your babies born early or small?
- What was the weight of your babies?

Know your family health history and tell your healthcare team about it

If you have a family history of high blood pressure or heart disease, you are more likely to get it later in life.

Live a healthy life

Eat a heart-healthy diet and get regular exercise, such as walking 30 minutes five times a week and doing muscle-strengthening exercises two or more times a week. Proper diet and exercise can reduce your risk factors for heart disease.

Stay at a healthy weight

Body mass index (BMI) measures your body fat based on your height. A healthy BMI is between 19 and 25. A BMI greater than 25 may increase your risk for heart disease. If your BMI is too high, talk to your healthcare provider about how to lose weight.

If you smoke, stop!

You should also try to avoid second-hand smoke. Tobacco raises blood pressure and damages blood vessels.

Know your numbers – Talk to your doctor about tracking these important measurements

Blood Pressure

A healthy blood pressure is around 120/80. If your blood pressure is higher, talk to your care provider about ways to lower it including lifestyle and diet modifications.

Cholesterol (blood fats or “lipids”)

If your levels are high, ask how you can lower them. Aim for these levels:
Total cholesterol: < 200 mg/dl
HDL (good cholesterol): = or > 50 mg/dl
LDL (bad cholesterol): < 100 mg/dl
Triglycerides: < 150 mg/dl

Blood glucose (blood sugar) and HbA1C

If either is high, ask how you can lower it.

Aim for these levels:

Fasting Blood Glucose

Normal: < 100 mg/dl
Pre-diabetes: 100 to 125 mg/dl
Diabetes: = or > 126 mg/dl

HbA1C

< 5.7%
5.7-6.4%
= or > 6.5%