



Common Medical Conditions

Can They Be Prevented or Reversed?

Heart disease, cancer, diabetes and other chronic diseases are the leading causes of death and disability in the U.S. One in two adults has a chronic disease and one in four has two or more, according to the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.

When it comes to our health, there are things we can't control and those that we can try to influence. We can't change our genetic makeup, gender, race or age—some of the factors that can make us more likely to develop a chronic medical condition. However, many health conditions are caused by lifestyle factors that we do have some ability to manage—our diet, exercise, stress management, weight and smoking habits.

You Make It Sound Easy

It's not. It can be a significant challenge to change your lifestyle, especially if you are surrounded by others with the same less-than-healthy habits. Even tougher is sticking to changes over the long haul. But when you consider that your efforts may help you feel better, it can be easier to keep an eye on the prize. Plus, there are other benefits. You may reduce your risk of developing a potentially debilitating and chronic illness. And maybe save a little money too.

As with any major life change, it helps to take baby steps. Set small goals that feel achievable, and add to them slowly. As your changes begin

to feel like a 'new normal,' you can set another (small) goal. You might even be able to convince a friend or family member to join you.

Here are three common conditions that lifestyle changes can help prevent, reverse or better manage.

High Blood Pressure

Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing on the walls of blood vessels as it flows through them. One in three adults has high blood pressure, also called hypertension, according to the American Heart Association. If it goes uncontrolled, it can lead to stroke, heart attack, blood clots, kidney disease, vision loss, and other serious problems.

A National Institutes of Health (NIH) study showed that a low-fat diet rich in fruits and vegetables combined with regular exercise was effective in reducing blood pressure numbers by an average of 5 mmHg. This number can vary significantly by many factors, including how dramatically diet improvements are made and weight loss occurs.

High Cholesterol

Our bodies naturally produce cholesterol; it is needed for healthy cells and hormones. The liver makes most of what is needed by the body and the rest comes from meat, fish, poultry, eggs and dairy products. Cholesterol is stored in the liver and secreted when the body needs it. When

Changing Smart!

If you take medications for high blood pressure, high cholesterol or diabetes, making healthy lifestyle changes may reduce your need for them. However, it is important to *check with your provider before making any changes or stopping medications*. Sometimes, it is necessary to continue taking them in addition to maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Making lifestyle changes isn't always easy. Your KnovaSolutions clinician is available to offer information and support as you start on your path. Call us with your questions and concerns. Our office hours are M-F, 9 am to 6 pm, CST.

800/355-0885.

Managing Stress

Figuring out how to take back your life often takes a conscious effort to identify the sources of your stress. The big things like a divorce or job change are more obvious, but how about the chronic stressors? Can you say 'no' more often, limit time with people who stress you out, and/or plan recharge time? For more tips, see our recent newsletters:

[Working Smart](#)

[Emotional Wellness](#)

Add Movement to Your Day

Let's face it—most of us are not going to be on *American Ninja Warrior!* Fortunately, there are many ways to move that don't include extreme sports. Exercise burns fat and calories, helps to manage weight, strengthens the heart and relieves stress—all ways to reduce your health risks.

Three 10-minute periods of moderately strenuous daily exercise can have benefits. Dancing, walking the dog, mopping the floor, and pulling weeds are forms of exercise you may already be doing. Standing uses more muscles and burns more calories than sitting so try to add a short break for every hour of sitting. A quick stretch or trip to the water fountain can refresh your thinking too.

*Tuso, Phillip. Prediabetes and Lifestyle Modification: Time to prevent a preventable disease. (2014). Perm J. 2014 Summer; 18: 88-93.

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there is too much, it can build up and form plaque, or deposits, on the walls of the arteries. This causes arteries to narrow and restrict blood flow.

Cholesterol is measured by a blood test in three ways: total cholesterol, LDL ('bad') and HDL ('good'). The Mayo Clinic advises eating less than 300 mg of cholesterol a day to reduce total and LDL cholesterol, and increase HDL. For reference, a fast food burger contains 60-150 mg of cholesterol and a tablespoon of butter contains 30 mg. Numerous studies show that a diet that includes walnuts, pecans, almonds, pistachios and macadamia nuts can increase HDL cholesterol by 8% and that a 10 pound weight loss can reduce LDL by 5-8%.

Prediabetes

More than 29 million Americans live with diabetes—a serious condition in which blood sugar (glucose) levels build to dangerously high levels. Another 86 million people live with prediabetes, and 90% of them *don't know they have it!*

Diabetes is a disorder of the endocrine system in which the pancreas makes too little or no insulin (type 1) or can't use insulin effectively (type 2). When you eat, the pancreas secretes insulin into the blood and delivers sugar to the muscles and tissues for energy. When there isn't enough insulin or it can't be used properly, sugar builds up in the blood and damages nerves and blood vessels.

Prediabetes refers to blood sugar levels that are higher than normal but not yet high enough to be diagnosed as diabetes. It is possible to prevent prediabetes from developing into type 2 diabetes with early lifestyle interventions; the likelihood can be reduced to 20%.*

The Common Thread

The common thread with these conditions is that lifestyle changes—diet changes, weight loss, stopping smoking, stress management and exercise—are linked to better health.

A menu of fresh foods can lower blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar levels. A healthy diet includes vegetables, fruit, whole grains, low-fat dairy items, skinless poultry, fish, nuts, legumes, and fats from plants (avocados, nuts, olive oil). Nutritionists recommend avoiding/reducing saturated fats (fatty meat, poultry skin, bacon, cheese, whole milk), trans fats (partially hydrogenated oils found in prepackaged foods and margarine), table salt, and high-carbohydrate foods (white rice/bread, sugary drinks, desserts). By decreasing saturated fat intake to less than 7% of daily calories, LDL cholesterol numbers can reduce 8-10%. Similarly, by increasing soluble fiber (found in whole grains, beans and produce), LDL can reduce another 3-5%.

Since American portions are often supersized, strive to keep your serving size to one. You can eat as many vegetables as you want (not talking potatoes though!) as long as they are seasoned with herbs and lemon juice, instead of sauces or gravies.

Being overweight is hard on the heart (which has to work extra to move blood throughout the body) and increases the risk for developing the above conditions. Even losing 5-10% of your body weight can improve health (if you weigh 200 pounds, that's a 10-20 pound weight loss).

Smoking (and secondhand smoke exposure) is associated with the buildup of fatty plaque on the inside of arteries, like with high cholesterol. Tobacco use causes blood vessels to constrict, which raises blood pressure. Smoking can also contribute to insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes.

Last but not least, too much stress can interfere with good health. It causes the body to release stress hormones (cortisol) into the blood, which can constrict blood vessels and increase heart rate. Prolonged stress can lead to overeating and excessive alcohol consumption—and chronic health conditions (see box for more about stress).