

Screen Early for Heart Disease

The American Heart Association releases new guidelines to begin screening for heart disease at age 20. Prevention is the priority.

For the first time, the American Heart Association (AHA) has recommended screening for heart disease to begin at age 20. In the first major update of the guidelines for the prevention of heart disease and stroke since they were originally released in 1997, the AHA incorporated new scientific findings and expert opinions about heart disease risk factors and how to best screen to help prevent this deadly disease.

The emphasis on starting at age 20 underscores the importance of how lifestyle factors early-on can impact an individual's risk of disease later. The AHA stresses that healthcare providers start early with screening and make *prevention* – by actively controlling the development of risk factors and hopefully avoiding debilitating heart attacks – a major priority.

The updated guidelines recommend the following screening for all individuals beginning at age 20:

At least every two years:

- ✓ Blood pressure
- ✓ Body mass index
- ✓ Waist circumference
- ✓ Pulse

At least every 5 years

- ✓ Blood cholesterol profile
- ✓ Blood sugar testing

A combined risk estimation is recommended every 5 years for individuals over 40 or with 2 or more risk factors. From this, healthcare providers can determine a person's risk of developing heart disease in the next 10 years. Experts have found that having multiple slight risk factors (like elevated blood pressure and mild overweight) can be more significant than one large risk factor (like very high cholesterol alone).

In addition to the screening, to prevent heart disease the AHA also recommends: avoiding smoking (including second-hand), regular exercise, maintaining desirable body weight, eating healthy, and monitoring cholesterol intake and blood pressure.

References:

American Heart Association. Internet site: www.americanheart.org

Food and Drug Administration. Internet site: www.cfsan.fda.gov/~lrd/hhtfacid.html. (July 2002).

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