



“Psychology Works” Fact Sheet: Psychological Risk Factors and Heart Disease

What is heart disease?

Heart disease, also known as cardiovascular disease, is a general term for a variety of conditions that affect the heart and blood vessels. It is a chronic disease that can lead to serious events including heart attack and death. Heart disease is one of the leading causes of death in Canada and worldwide.

What are the risk factors for heart disease?

There are many risk factors for heart disease. There are “uncontrollable risk factors” including age, sex, heredity, and ethnicity. There are also “modifiable risk factors” that can be controlled or impacted by changes that you make in your lifestyle. These risk factors include smoking, excessive alcohol intake, excess body weight, high blood pressure, abnormal blood cholesterol levels, decreased regular exercise, diabetes, excessive stress levels, anxiety, and depression.

Stress and anxiety and heart disease

Everyone experiences stress at some point in life. In these situations, your body reacts by releasing stress hormones, which in turn increases sweating, breathing, heart rate and blood pressure, as your body revs up into high gear to deal with the perceived stress. In the short term, these reactions may be helpful. However, in the long-term stress can be damaging. When individuals experience constant stress over a long period of time, fat cells may be converted into cholesterol, platelets can become more “sticky”, and patterns of daily life may change (decreased amount of healthy eating, regular exercise, and rest).

It is common for cardiac patients to experience varying degrees of fear or nervousness related to their health condition. About one in five (20%) cardiac patients experience significant anxiety symptoms that interfere with daily functioning including: uncontrollable worry, restlessness, irritability, muscle tension, headaches, sleep disturbances, increased fatigue, sweating, and/or gastrointestinal/stomach problems.

Depression and heart disease

Depression is also common in people with heart problems. Similar to anxiety, about one in five patients experience clinical (or major) depression that significantly interferes with daily functioning. Symptoms include feelings of sadness, loss of interest in pleasurable activities, changes in weight and/or appetite, sleep disturbances, decreased energy, difficulties with concentration/memory, feelings of worthlessness, helplessness, or hopelessness, and/or thoughts about suicide/death. Depression can contribute to both the onset of heart disease, and to a shortened life-span following a diagnosis of heart disease.



How can psychological treatments help to manage heart disease?

Psychologists play an important role in helping people to prevent and manage chronic diseases like heart disease. In addition to general training in the treatment of depression and anxiety, many psychologists are also specifically trained to help people cope with chronic diseases. In fact, some cardiac rehabilitation programs have a psychologist on their team.

Here are some ways that psychological approaches can help to prevent and manage heart disease:

- **Stress and anxiety management** – How you perceive stress in your life affects the level of stress or anxiety that you experience. It is important to learn how to recognize and identify your own “stress triggers” and how stress impacts you on a daily/regular basis. To begin managing anxiety, it is important to develop healthy coping strategies including becoming aware of emotions which can trigger anxiety, learning relaxation/breathing techniques, distracting yourself from thoughts or physical symptoms, doing something pleasurable, sharing fears and worries with someone you trust, and focusing on what you can control rather than on the things you cannot. Additionally, positive social support networks (e.g., friends and family) and daily physical activity help reduce the effects of stress and anxiety.
- **Depression management** – Negative thinking, low activity levels, and difficulty handling strong emotions are often involved in depression. Many people with heart disease may also have unresolved issues of loss, grief, and anger, which may be weighing them down and draining their energy. Getting help to learn new ways of thinking and learning to better manage negative thoughts and strong emotions can be beneficial. Additionally, it is important to set realistic goals and engage in self-care activities such as regular exercise and doing pleasurable activities, even if you do not feel like doing so.
- **Making and maintaining lifestyle changes** – Psychologists and psychological strategies can also help people to make and maintain changes in their diet and exercise routines, which are important parts of managing heart disease. Psychologists can assist with issues such as identifying your motivations for change, setting realistic and achievable goals, developing and enhancing motivation, and building on success in making lifestyle changes.

Where can I get more information?

Thriving with Heart Disease: A Unique Program for You and Your Family. Live Happier, Healthier, Longer - by Sotile & Cantor-Cooke

Mind Over Mood: Change How You Feel by Changing the Way You Think - by Greenberger & Padesky

It's Not All in Your Head: How Worrying about Your Health Could Be Making You Sick – and What You Can Do About It - by Asmundson & Taylor

Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness - by J. Kabat-Zinn



Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada: <http://www.heartandstroke.com>

Canadian Association of Cardiac Rehabilitation: <http://www.cacr.ca>

You can consult with a registered psychologist to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you. Provincial, territorial and some municipal associations of psychology often maintain referral services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, please visit: <http://www.cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations/>.

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Revised: December 2011

Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: factsheets@cpa.ca

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