

# Getting to the heart of the matter

Take steps to reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease



Conditions such as hypertension, diabetes and high cholesterol are increasingly becoming common among younger people.  
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EVERY day, cardiovascular disease claims the lives of 17 Singaporeans, according to a Ministry of Health report, making it one of the top causes of death here.

Last year, it accounted for almost 30 per cent of all deaths — in other words, nearly one of three deaths here is caused by heart disease or stroke.

### High-risk factors

Dr Low Ting Ting, a consultant with the Department of Cardiology at the National University Heart Centre, Singapore (NUHCS), says: "Singapore is unique in the region as a city of rapid urbanisation and socio-economic development.

"With this, lifestyle factors — such as an 'affluent' diet that is high in saturated fat and processed food, lack of exercise, and high stress — play an important role in the rise of cardiovascular disease here."

Adding that every segment of the population is at risk, she says conditions such as hypertension, diabetes and hyperlipidemia (high cholesterol) are now more common in

younger people than before.

Despite this, there is a general lack of awareness among the population and sub-optimal treatment of cardiovascular risk factors, notes Dr Low.

"A longer life expectancy due to medical advancements means Singaporeans will need to live with cardiovascular disease for a longer time," she adds.

According to Dr Low, those who smoke, have a strong family history of premature heart disease or stroke, or suffer from high cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes and kidney disease have an increased risk of contracting cardiovascular disease.

She said that women who experience cardiovascular complications during pregnancy and after menopause, people with rheumatological conditions, obstructive sleep apnoea, and those who have previously undergone radiotherapy or chemotherapy also have a higher risk of developing the disease.

"Anyone with any of these cardiovascular risk factors has a higher chance of developing cardiovascular disease. If you have more than one cardiovascular risk factor, the likelihood of major cardiovascular events

in your lifetime will be increased exponentially," Dr Low says.

### Control what you can

The good news: The risk factors for cardiovascular diseases are classified as modifiable and non-modifiable.

Examples of non-modifiable risks are one's age, race and family history. For instance, older patients are more at risk of getting a heart attack or stroke.

Studies investigating the connection between established coronary risk factors and incident coronary heart disease for Chinese, Malay and Asian Indian males have shown that Indian patients are more at risk. Those with a family history of early coronary artery disease or strokes are similarly at risk.

Modifiable or controllable risk factors include smoking, obesity, physical inactivity, a high-stress lifestyle, hypertension, diabetes and high cholesterol.

Says Dr Low: "It is important to stop smoking, have a healthy diet and exercise, and get your blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar levels down — especially if you have a family history of premature heart disease."

### REDUCE YOUR RISKS

Dr Low recommends these lifestyle changes to reduce your risk of developing cardiovascular disease:

- Make sure your diet is high in fibre, low in salt and saturated fat, and includes plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables, wholegrains and fish;
- Do enough exercise — the cardiovascular prevention guidelines recommend at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise a week, or 30 minutes a day;
- Don't smoke. If you do, quit. The risk decreases by almost half in the first year after quitting;
- Go for regular health screenings, and seek treatment for hypertension, diabetes and high cholesterol as these conditions are "silent killers"; and
- See a doctor immediately for chest pain, jaw pain, pain in the left arm, shortness of breath, inexplicable fatigue, palpitations, light-headedness, swelling of the limbs or abdomen, and aches in the calves.

Reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease further in these ways:

- Go for yearly screening of blood pressure, fasting glucose levels and fasting lipid levels;
- Ensure that the Body Mass Index (BMI) is within the healthy weight range — BMI of <23kg/m<sup>2</sup>, waist circumference of <90cm for men, <80cm for women; and
- Get a cardiovascular risk evaluation by a doctor for an appropriate customised risk factor profile.

Dr Low says these three groups of patients should go for additional screenings:

- Athletes who need pre-participation physical evaluations for competitive sports;
- Women in the reproductive age group who have risk factors before pregnancy; and
- Cancer survivors who have received cardiotoxic drugs for chemotherapy or chest radiotherapy.