

Know your risks for heart diseases

America's heart disease epidemic began in the 1920s and 1930s. From the earliest days, doctors suspected that being male, advancing age, a family history of heart disease, and diabetes were important contributors to coronary artery disease. But they didn't begin to suspect smoking, the most dangerous risk factor of all, until the 1950s. The cholesterol connection wasn't made until the 1960s. Now, 10 major risk factors have been firmly identified:

- Risk factors you can't change
 - Male gender
 - Family history
 - Advancing age
- Risk factors you can change
 - Smoking or using tobacco; exposure to passive smoke
 - Abnormal cholesterol – high LDL, low HDL
 - High blood pressure
 - Lack of exercise
 - Diabetes
 - Obesity
 - Psychological factors such as stress, anger, depression, and social isolation.

Many of these risk factors can be improved by simple lifestyle changes and, if necessary, medications to improve cholesterol, lower blood pressure, and manage diabetes.