

The Link between Pre-eclampsia and Heart Disease

Preventing Heart Disease Later in Life

What is pre-eclampsia?

Pre-eclampsia is high blood pressure that begins after 20 weeks of pregnancy. It can be a serious problem for some people. It is marked by a sudden increase in blood pressure and protein in the urine.

Pre-eclampsia is one of the main causes of pre-term birth. It must be watched closely, as it may threaten the life of both the pregnant person and the baby. The only treatment is delivery of the baby.

Symptoms of preeclampsia may include:

- High blood pressure 140/90 (“140 over 90”) or higher.
- Sudden weight gain (more than 2 pounds per week)
- Swelling of the feet, hands, fingers, or face (especially under the eyes)
- Headaches that don’t go away with over-the-counter pain medicine like acetaminophen (Tylenol)
- Sudden changes in vision, including double or blurry vision, flashing lights, and auras
- Sharp pain in the upper right belly
- Nausea (feeling sick to your stomach) and vomiting (throwing up).

How are pre-eclampsia and heart disease linked?

People who had pre-eclampsia in pregnancy have a higher risk of heart disease and stroke later in life. In fact, many of the risk factors are the same.

Your risk of heart disease is higher if you:

- Have a family history of heart disease.
- Are overweight.
- Have problems with blood clotting
- Have 3 or more of these signs of metabolic syndrome:
 - Waist size larger than 35 inches for those assigned female at birth
 - High blood pressure
 - High blood sugar
 - High triglycerides (a type of fat in the blood)
 - Low HDL (good cholesterol).

continued

How do I reduce my risk for heart disease?

Know your family health history

If you have a history of heart disease in your family, you are more likely to get it later in life. Be sure to tell your care team about your family's health history.

Live a healthy life

Eat a heart-healthy diet and get regular exercise (such as walking 30 to 60 minutes five or more times a week). Proper diet and exercise can reduce your risk factors for heart disease

Stay at a healthy weight

Body mass index (BMI) measures your body fat based on your height. A healthy BMI is between 19 and 25. A BMI greater than 25 may increase your risk for heart disease.

To check your BMI, go to www.nhlbi.nih.gov and search for "BMI calculator." If your BMI is too high, talk to your doctor about losing weight. Lowering your weight can lower your blood pressure and improve cholesterol levels.

If you smoke, stop

You should also avoid second-hand smoke. Tobacco raises blood pressure and damages blood vessels.

Talk with your doctor about aspirin

Taking low-dose aspirin may reduce your risk of heart attack and stroke.

Know your numbers

Blood pressure: A healthy blood pressure is around 120/80. If your blood pressure is higher, talk to your care provider. Ask about ways to lower your blood pressure.

Cholesterol: Talk to your doctor about tracking your cholesterol (blood fats). If your levels are high, ask how you can lower them. Aim for these levels:

- Total cholesterol: less than 200
- HDL (good cholesterol): greater than 50
- LDL (bad cholesterol): less than 100
- Triglycerides: less than 150

Blood glucose (blood sugar): Talk to your doctor about tracking blood glucose levels. If they are high, ask how you can lower them.

- Normal: less than 100
- Pre-diabetes: 100 to 125
- Diabetes: 126 or higher

See the websites below for health tips on diet, exercise, BMI and quitting tobacco.

Helpful resources

Preeclampsia Foundation:
www.preeclampsia.org

Heart health:
www.womenheart.org

General diet:
www.choosemyplate.gov

DASH diet:
www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health-topics/dash-eating-plan

Quit Plan (for smokers):
www.quitplan.com

BMI calculator:
www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/lose_wt/BMI/bmicalc.htm