How To Strengthen Your Heart
The one health report you can’t afford to miss.

By Dr. Isadore Rosenfeld
It is essential to know what to do if you are vulnerable to heart disease—and to do it, even if it means changing your lifestyle. Controlling the important risk factors can make a big difference.

Heart Health Starts With You

By Dr. Isadore Rosenfeld

Remember when cardiologists used to focus on treatment—for an acute heart attack, or heart failure, or a serious rhythm abnormality, or a heart-valve problem. While therapy is still critical and constantly improving, there has been a great deal of recent emphasis on prevention. And it is paying off. Last month, it was announced—for the first time ever—that the number of deaths from heart disease for Americans under age 85 is now less than those from cancer. Mortality from both diseases is falling, but more so from heart disease than from cancer. However, says the AHA, deaths from all cardiovascular diseases (heart disease but also stroke and blood-vessel problems) still outnumber cancer deaths. Now, more than ever, we must take advantage of what we know to keep the numbers falling.

Your Job: Control the Risk Factors

Prevention is more than wishful thinking; its effectiveness is documented by facts and figures. We really can avoid premature heart disease by teaching our kids the right lifestyle in their early years. Doctors are emphasizing to premenopausal women—long considered resistant to heart disease—how to modify the risk factors already present that may give them heart trouble later in life. When we discharge cardiac patients from the hospital, whether after a heart attack or cardiac surgery, we not only prescribe the medications they need to control their symptoms but also teach them what to do to lessen the likelihood that their problem will recur.

Eliminating or modifying the risk factors that we always knew contributed to atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries) has had a measurable impact. The only factors we are not able to influence are genetic vulnerability, gender and aging. You can’t choose your ancestors or (yet) alter your genes. But if you stop smoking, normalize high blood pressure, reduce elevated cholesterol levels, control high blood sugar, lose weight and exercise regularly, you can improve your odds—and we have the numbers to prove it! So here’s what to do:

Stop smoking. More than 440,000 Americans die each year from smoking-related illnesses, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Cigarette smokers are two

Deaths from heart disease are on the decline, thanks to modern advances in treatment and especially prevention. But more can be done.
A NETWORK OF CORONARY ARTERIES located on the heart’s surface (left) delivers fresh blood to the heart muscle. Coronary artery disease refers to the buildup of plaques in these arteries, narrowing them (angina pectoris) or blocking them completely and causing a heart attack.

Heart disease affects three kinds of people.

John Godleski died of heart disease. He was just two years old. A little boy. Imagine how his mom and dad died a little bit as well. Cardiovascular disease is America’s number two killer of children under 15. The American Heart Association can help provide lifesaving information for your family. We have the research. We have the knowledge.

Let us share it with you.

Visit or call now for your free Health Quiz and American Heart Association Cookbook.
The Year Of The Heart

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to four times more likely to develop heart attacks and coronary heart disease than nonsmokers. Men have a slightly higher risk than women. If you smoke and are in your 20s, you are reducing your lifespan significantly. On average, lifetime smokers have a 50% chance of dying from a smoking-related illness. But if you stop now (it’s never too late) and remain tobacco-free, you can virtually nullify that risk. One year after quitting, your risk of heart disease drops by 50%, according to the World Health Organization. Within 15 years, a former smoker’s risk of dying from heart disease approaches that of a lifetime nonsmoker.

If you stop smoking now, you can reduce your risk of heart disease by half in one year.

Lower your cholesterol. Statistics also have documented the enormous benefit of lowering your blood cholesterol level, whether by diet or medication or a combination of both. Almost everyone who’s had a heart attack or bypass surgery is now given a statin, a type of cholesterol-lowering drug, regardless of his or her cholesterol level. The statin drugs that reduce cholesterol also reduce the level of C-reactive protein, a marker of inflammation.

Control your blood pressure. There are many medications now available to treat high blood pressure without the side effects that

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What disease is the most common cause of death in the U.S.?

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Risk factors are behaviors or conditions that make it more likely for a person to develop a disease. Which of these is a risk factor for heart disease?

What disease or condition do you believe we have made the most progress in preventing, treating and curing?

Most of those polled were unaware that research has made significantly more progress preventing and treating heart disease than other diseases. Cardiovascular disease is the only group of diseases for which the mortality rate has decreased dramatically in the last half-century; in many cases, research has turned it from a killer into a chronic disease or found ways to prevent it altogether.

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were common with the older drugs. Normalizing blood pressure greatly reduces the risk of both stroke and heart attack by slowing down the formation of arterial plaques that narrow the blood vessels everywhere in the body—especially in the brain, heart, kidneys, eyes and legs.

Control your blood sugar. Almost 80% of people with diabetes die of some form of heart or blood-vessel disease. That risk can be reduced by keeping sugar levels as close to normal as possible. We also now have identified a condition called prediabetes. Millions of people whose blood sugar is only slightly elevated can be protected from developing the full-blown disease—and its life-threatening complications—by losing weight, exercising and, if necessary, taking oral medication to lower their blood sugar.

Lose weight. Excess weight is the most difficult risk factor to control, as evidenced by all the diets and “miracle pills” that come and go. Despite Atkins, South Beach, Beverly Hills, Scarsdale and all the other diets that have hit the best-seller lists, the old reliable formula still holds: Calories in should be less than calories out. That means eating less (fewer “calories in”) and exercising to burn the calories you do consume (more “calories out”).

But exercise, good for both the mind and the body, must be done on a regular basis, not just when you feel like it. It doesn’t need to be exhausting or unpleasant. Choose the kind that you enjoy and set aside a minimum of 30 minutes a day on most days of the week to do it.

Here’s the bottom line: Cardiovascular diseases remain the No.1 cause of death in this country. Thanks to modern advances in prevention and treatment, they really don’t have to be. You don’t have to go it alone. Heart health should be a joint venture with your doctor, who is best suited to help you.

PARADE Health Editor Dr. Isadore Rosenfeld is a former member of the advisory panel to the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services. He also is the author of nine best-selling books. His latest is “Dr. Isadore Rosenfeld’s 2005 Breakthrough Health” (Rodale).

If You Think You’re Having a Heart Attack

Some heart attacks are sudden and intense—the kind you see in the movies, where everyone immediately knows what the problem is. But most real-life heart attacks start slowly, with mild pain or discomfort. Often the patient isn’t sure what’s wrong and may wait too long before seeking help.

What To Do

☐ Get to a hospital right away. If you or someone you are with has chest discomfort, especially with one or more of the other warning signs of a heart attack, don’t wait longer than five minutes before calling for help.

☐ Phone 911. This is almost always the fastest way to get lifesaving treatment. The emergency medical services (EMS) staff can arrive as much as an hour sooner than someone traveling to the hospital by car. The paramedics on the staff are trained to revive someone whose heart has stopped.

☐ If you can’t reach the emergency medical services, have someone drive you to the hospital right away. Do not drive yourself.

Warning Signs

Here are some of the signs that can mean a heart attack is happening:

☐ Chest discomfort. Most heart attacks involve discomfort in the center of the chest that either persists or comes and goes. It can be a sensation of pressure (like someone sitting on your chest), squeezing, fullness or pain.

☐ Discomfort in other areas of the upper body. There may be pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach.

☐ Shortness of breath. A feeling of being unable to catch your breath may accompany the chest discomfort or occur without it.

☐ Other warning signs may include breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea or light-headedness.

For More on Heart Health

Visit www.americanheart.org to learn about the American Heart Association’s Go Red for Women campaign, which encourages women to protect their heart health. You’ll also find learning tools and more on prevention, diagnosis and treatment of heart disease. Or call 1-888-AHA-2222. And visit www.parade.com for more on The Year of the Heart.