

Taking Charge of Your Health

Have you ever walked out of your doctor's office after a visit confused about what she or he just told you? If your answer is yes, you are not alone. Health issues can be complex and hard to understand.

At the same time, it seems that we are being asked to do more and more to improve our health. There are almost daily news reports about advice on eating certain foods or exercising to prevent certain diseases. Keeping track of all this information can seem overwhelming. And the sometimes conflicting advice clouds our understanding even more. Plus, if you have a family, you are likely making health choices not only for yourself, but also for them!

Although the matter of health can be challenging, there are ways to make it easier. To start, it is important to learn about the things you can and can't control.

Understanding risk factors: Learning what you can and can't control

Part of learning how to take charge of your health involves understanding your risk factors for different diseases. Risk factors are things in your life that increase your chances of getting a certain disease.

Some risk factors are beyond your control. You may be born with them or exposed to them through no fault of your own. Risk factors that you have little or no control over include your:

- family history of a disease
- sex



- ancestry
- age
- health—having one health problem may raise your risk of having another (for instance, having diabetes increases your chances of getting heart disease)

Risk factors you can control include:

- what you eat
- how much physical activity you get
- whether you use tobacco
- how much alcohol you drink
- whether you use illegal drugs
- whether you use your seatbelt

In fact, it has been estimated that almost 35 percent of all U.S. early deaths in 2000 could have been avoided by changing just three behaviors:

- stopping smoking

- eating a healthy diet (for example, eating more fruits and vegetables and less red meat)
- getting more physical activity

Having more than one risk factor

You can have one risk factor for a disease or you can have many. The more risk factors you have, the more likely you are to get the disease.

One doctor has suggested thinking of multiple risk factors for a disease in terms of your chances of breaking a leg when leaving a building.* If you're a healthy person and don't have any risk factors for, say, heart disease, it's like leaving the building on the ground floor. In this case, your chances of breaking a leg are small.

But let's say you have one risk factor for heart disease: diabetes. Now it's like leaving the building by jumping from the second floor. Your chances of breaking a leg are now greater. If you also have another risk factor, such as high blood pressure, it's like jumping from the third floor. If you also smoke tobacco, now you're jumping from the fourth floor.

To lower your risks, all you have to do is come down the stairs. In the case of heart disease, that means taking steps such as quitting smoking and controlling your blood pressure through healthy eating, physical activity, and taking medications.

Inheriting risk—your family health history

Rarely, you can inherit a mutated gene that alone causes you to get a disease. Genes control chemical reactions in our bodies. If you inherit a faulty gene, your

body may not be able to carry out an important chemical reaction. For instance, a faulty gene may make your blood unable to clot. This problem is at the root of a rare bleeding disorder.

More often, you can inherit genes from one or both of your parents that put you at higher risk of certain diseases. But having a gene for a certain disease does not mean you will get it. There are many unknown factors that may raise or lower your chances of getting the disease.

You can't change your genes, but you can change behaviors that affect your health, such as smoking, inactivity, and poor eating habits. People with a family health history of chronic disease may have the most to gain from making lifestyle changes. In many cases, making these changes can reduce your risk of disease even if the disease runs in your family.

Another change you can make is to have screening tests, such as mammograms and colorectal cancer screening. These screening tests help detect disease early. People who have a family health history of a chronic disease may benefit the most from screening tests that look for risk factors or early signs of disease. Finding disease early, before symptoms appear, can mean better health in the long run.

How do I find out my disease risks?

It is important to talk to your doctor or nurse about your individual health risks, even if you have to bring it up yourself. And it's important for your doctor to know not just about your health, but your family health history as well. Come to health care visits armed with information about you, your children, siblings,

parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and nieces and nephews, including:

- major medical conditions and causes of death
- age of disease onset and age at death
- ethnic background
- general lifestyle information like heavy drinking and smoking

Your doctor or health professional will assess your risk of disease based on your family health history and other risk factors. He or she may also recommend things you can do to help prevent disease, such as getting more physical activity, changing your diet, or using screening tests to detect disease early.

Web sites also can help you calculate your risks of getting certain diseases, some of which are listed on page 426 of the Appendix. **These online tools should never replace the information from or advice of a doctor or nurse.**

How this book can help you

In this book, we discuss the risk factors for major diseases that affect women—both those that you can control and those you can't. If it is possible to control a risk factor to lower your chances of getting a disease, we will tell you how. We will also discuss diseases for which causes and risk factors are not yet understood.

This book also explains:

- what happens to your body with certain diseases

- tips for handling many diseases and health conditions
- how to stay healthy during key phases of your life, such as during pregnancy and menopause
- how to communicate with doctors and nurses
- the screenings, tests, and immunizations women need
- where to find more health information that you can trust

In each chapter, besides important health tips, you will also find personal stories from women across the country. You may find that some of their experiences are similar to what you may be going through. Hopefully, these stories will show you that you are not alone.

How this book can help you help your family

As you learn about diseases that affect women, you will learn how to improve your family's health as well. Diseases such as heart disease, cancer, and stroke can, of course, affect men as well as women. Steps you can take to reduce your chances of getting these diseases can also apply to the men in your life. And because heart disease may start as early as childhood due to poor eating habits and lack of physical activity, your efforts may help your children lead longer and healthier lives.

What you do today counts—for you and your loved ones. Take charge of your health! ■

*Edwards A. Communicating risks through analogies. *BMJ*. 2003;327:749.