

# African Americans Heart Disease and Stroke Fact Sheet

## Take Control of Your Heart: It's All in the ABCS

Every year, Americans suffer more than **1.5 million heart attacks and strokes**. Nearly 44% of African American men and 48% of African American women have some form of cardiovascular disease that includes heart disease and stroke. But you can reduce your risk and improve your heart health by following the **ABCS**:

- **A** – Take **a**spirin as directed by your health care provider.
- **B** – Control your **b**lood pressure.
- **C** – Manage your **c**holesterol.
- **S** – Don't **s**moke.

### **A: Take aspirin as directed by your health care provider.**

Ask your health care provider if aspirin can reduce your risk of having a heart attack or stroke. Be sure to tell your health care provider if you have a family medical history of heart disease or stroke.

### **B: Control your blood pressure.**

Blood pressure measures the force of blood pushing against the walls of the arteries. If your blood pressure stays high, you may suffer from high blood pressure, also called hypertension. High blood pressure increases the risk of heart attack and stroke more than any other risk factor. African Americans are more likely than any other racial or ethnic group to have high blood pressure and to develop the condition earlier in life. To keep your blood pressure under control, find out what your blood pressure numbers are, and ask your health care provider what those numbers mean for your health. If you have high blood pressure, work with your health care provider to lower it.

### **C: Manage your cholesterol.**

Cholesterol is a waxy substance produced by the liver and is found in certain foods. Your body needs cholesterol, but when you have too much it can build up in your arteries and cause heart disease. There are different types of cholesterol. One type is high-density lipoprotein (HDL), or good cholesterol

that can protect you from heart disease. Another type is low-density-lipoprotein (LDL), known as bad cholesterol that can increase your risk of heart disease. Talk to your health care provider about cholesterol and how to lower your bad cholesterol if it's too high.

### **S: Don't smoke.**

About 1 of 5 African American adults smokes cigarettes. If you smoke, quit. Talk with your health care provider about ways to help you stick with your decision. It's never too late to quit smoking. Call 1-800-QUIT-NOW today or visit [smokefree.gov](http://smokefree.gov)<sup>External</sup>.

### **What do I need to know about high blood pressure?**

High blood pressure is the leading cause of heart attack and stroke in the United States. **About 2 out of every 5 African American adults have high blood pressure, and less than half of them have it under control.**

### **How is blood pressure measured?**

Two numbers (e.g., 140/90) help determine blood pressure. The first number measures systolic pressure, which is the pressure in the blood vessels when the heart beats. The second number measures diastolic pressure, which is the pressure in the blood vessels when the heart rests between beats. If the first number is 140 or higher, or the second number is 90 or higher then you have high blood pressure and should talk to your health care provider.

### **When and how should I check my blood pressure readings?**

Check your blood pressure readings on a regular basis, even if you feel fine. Generally, people with high blood pressure have no symptoms. You can check your blood pressure readings at home, at a pharmacy, and at a doctor's office.

### **How can I control my blood pressure?**

Make control your goal! Work with your health care provider to make a plan for controlling your blood pressure and follow their guidelines, which may include:

- **Eat a healthy diet.** Eat more fruits and vegetables and choose foods low in sodium. African Americans as well as adults aged 51 years and

older and people with high blood pressure, diabetes, or chronic kidney disease should consume only 1,500 mg of sodium per day.

- **Get moving.** Staying physically active will help you control your weight and strengthen your heart. Try walking for 10 minutes, 3 times a day, at least 5 days a week. This will give you a total of 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity.
- **Take your medications.** If you have high blood pressure, your health care provider may give you medicine to help control it. It's important to follow your doctor's instructions when taking the medication. Tell your health care provider if the medicine makes you feel bad. Your doctor can talk with you about different ways to reduce side effects or recommend another medicine that may have fewer side effects.

Your doctor is not the only health care provider that can help you follow the ABCS.

Nurses, pharmacists, community health workers, health coaches, and other providers can work with you and your doctor to help you achieve your health goals. Don't be afraid to ask questions like these:

- What is my risk for heart disease? Should I take an aspirin every day to reduce my risk?
- What is my blood pressure? What does it mean for me, and what should I do about it?
- What kinds of support are available to help me quit smoking?