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Heart & Vascular

# Is Your Heart Health a Family Matter?

Our risk of heart disease is something many of us should know—as heart disease is the top cause of death in the U.S. And, as Bayhealth Cardiologist Mussaber Ahmad, DO, explains, personal risk factors aren't the only ones to consider.

"Family history is also important to determine overall risk, as there is a genetic component associated with coronary artery disease," said Dr. Ahmad, who became a doctor because both of his grandfathers passed away from coronary artery disease (CAD) – the most common type of heart disease.

To help figure out if genetics or a family history play a role in your overall risk of heart disease, Dr. Ahmad said you can start with the following key factors.

- A first-degree relative (biological parent or sibling) who has/had heart disease
- Any relative(s) who has/had any of the following:
  - Angina
  - Heart attack (myocardial infarction)
  - Heart failure
  - High cholesterol
  - Peripheral artery disease (PAD)
  - Stroke
  - Transient ischemic attack (TIA)
  - Thoracic or abdominal aortic aneurysm

Beyond this list, Dr. Ahmad said there are other factors that need to be taken into account. They include the age and gender of any first-degree relatives with heart disease and your family's ethnicity/race.

"If a male first-degree relative has CAD before the age of 55 or a female first-degree relative has CAD before the age of 65, this is considered premature CAD, which puts you at higher risk," explained Dr. Ahmad. "Another important factor is belonging to a high-risk race or ethnicity such as South Asians. By some estimates, South Asians account for up to 60 percent of the world's heart disease population, despite making up only 25 percent of the world's general population. Also, compared to the general population, South Asians have up to a four times greater risk of developing heart disease."

"A history of pregnancy complications such as preeclampsia or a history of menopause before age 40 are other risk factors women need to consider," he added.

Putting together your family history will take some time and effort. Dr. Ahmad suggests you start by finding out if your parents, brother(s), and/or sister(s) have or had any of the medical conditions mentioned above or other risk factors.

Once you have your family history compiled be sure to share it with your doctor. "As physicians, we use family history and your personal risk factors to determine 10-year and lifetime risk of cardiovascular disease, and then recommend the appropriate therapy based on your risk. Examples of therapies we may prescribe include statins and aspirin," said Dr. Ahmad.

While family history plays a role, Dr. Ahmad said your personal risk factors for heart disease are most important. This includes ones such as hypertension, high cholesterol, diabetes, chronic kidney disease, obesity, and age. When it comes to age, your risk of heart disease goes up with each decade of life. That's why Dr. Ahmad also said screening with blood tests and identifying additional risk factors starting at age 20 is a good idea.

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