

# Heart Disease: Reduce Your Child's Risk

Heredity is clearly an important risk factor for conditions such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. However, researchers are steadily gathering evidence about how diet influence development of diseases. Experts agree that healthy eating habits from an early age can lower the risk of developing several deadly diseases later on. A diet designed to lower the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and other serious diseases is one that benefits the whole family, adults and children alike.



## Risk Factors for Heart Disease

Heart disease is the number one killer of men and women in the United States and most industrialized countries. The chief risk factors are:

- **Smoking**
- **High blood pressure**
- **Diabetes**
- **High blood level of cholesterol**
- **Physical inactivity**
- **Obesity**
- **Family history** of early-onset heart disease



## Following a Heart-Healthy Diet from an Early Age

American children and adolescents, on average, eat more **saturated fat** and have higher blood cholesterol levels than young people their age in most other developed countries. The rate of heart disease tends to keep pace with cholesterol levels. One study found early signs of hardening of the arteries (atherosclerosis) in 7% of children between ages 10 and 15 years, and the rate was twice as high between ages 15 and 20.

According to the **American Heart Association**, a heart-healthy diet from an early age lowers cholesterol and if followed through adolescence and beyond, should reduce the risk of coronary artery disease in adulthood.

All children older than 2 years should follow a heart-healthy diet, including **low-fat** dairy products. For children between the ages of 12 months and 2 years with a family history of obesity, abnormal blood fats, or cardiovascular disease, reduced-fat milk should be considered.

## Is There a Family History?

When you and your children first saw your pediatrician, you were probably asked if there was a history of heart or vascular disease in your family. If your children were young, their grandparents were probably relatively young as well and may not have had a **heart attack** or stroke (even though they may have been headed for one). If heart disease in the grandparents becomes apparent later on, be sure to bring it to your pediatrician's attention at the next checkup.

## Cholesterol Testing for Adopted Children

Complete biological family medical histories are not usually available to **adopted children** and their parents, even for those adopted in open proceedings. To prevent the development of diseases linked to high blood cholesterol levels, adopted children should be screened periodically for blood lipid (fat) levels throughout childhood.

## Additional Information

- [Healthy Active Living for Families](#)
- [The 5 Food Groups: Sample Choices](#)
- [Overcoming Obstacles to Physical Activity](#)
- [What about Fat and Cholesterol?](#)
- [Your Family Health History & Genetics](#)



**Source:** *Nutrition: What Every Parent Needs to Know* (Copyright © American Academy of Pediatrics 2011)  
Updated 8/20/2015