Preventing Cardiovascular Complications

As people get older, the risk for developing cardiovascular problems, such as heart attack and stroke, increases. Additional factors that increase the risk of developing cardiovascular problems include:

- Being overweight or obese
- High blood pressure
- Unhealthy cholesterol levels (high LDL, high triglycerides, or low HDL)
- Prediabetes or diabetes mellitus
- Smoking
- Excessive alcohol intake
- Family history of heart disease

Certain cancer treatments given during childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood may increase the risk of developing cardiovascular complications. It is important for you to be aware of these risks so that you can practice healthy habits that can help prevent cardiovascular problems.

**What increases the risk for being overweight or obese?**

Treatment factors:

- Radiation to the brain or head (especially at doses of 18 Gy or higher)
- Surgery to the brain affecting the “mid-brain” area (containing the pituitary gland)

Other known risk factors:

- Overeating
- Eating a diet that is high in fats and sugar
- Not having regular physical activity
- Having certain medical conditions, like an underactive thyroid (hypothyroidism), or low levels of GH

**What increases the risk for high blood pressure?**

Treatments factors:

- Ifosfamide
- Cisplatin
- Carboplatin
- Radiation involving the kidneys, including the abdomen, flank, and total body irradiation (TBI)
- Removal of one kidney (see related Health Link: Single Kidney Health)
- Hematopoietic cell transplant (particularly if complicated by chronic graft-versus-host disease)

Other known risk factors:

- Being overweight or obese
- Having a family history of high blood pressure
• Not getting regular physical activity
• Eating a diet that is high in salt

What increases the risk for unhealthy cholesterol levels (including high triglycerides and low HDL)?

Treatment factors:
• Total body irradiation (TBI)
• Abdominal radiation

Other known risk factors:
• Being overweight or obese
• Having a family history of unhealthy cholesterol levels
• Not getting regular physical activity
• Eating a diet high in fat

What increases the risk for high blood sugar/diabetes mellitus?

Treatment factors:
• Abdominal radiation
• Total body irradiation (TBI)
• Prolonged treatment with corticosteroids, such as prednisone or dexamethasone

Other known risk factors:
• Being overweight or obese (note that survivors who received TBI may be at increased risk even if they are not overweight or obese)
• Having a family history of diabetes

How I can I tell if I am overweight or obese?

Visit with your health care provider about your weight to determine if you are at a healthy weight for your height, age and activity level. The body mass index (BMI) is a tool your provider may use to help determine if you are at a healthy weight. BMI calculators and information on how to interpret results are available on-line at www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/bmi/.

What can I do to lower my risk of cardiovascular complications?

• Get regular check-ups and follow your health care provider’s recommendations regarding how often you need blood pressure checks and blood tests to monitor your cholesterol and/or blood sugar levels.
• Eat a healthy diet (See related Health Link: Staying Health through Nutrition and Physical Activity).
• Increase physical activity if you are able (See related Health Link: Staying Health through Nutrition and Physical Activity).
• Avoid smoking. If you are interested in quitting smoking, online assistance is available from the National Institutes of Health at www.smokefree.gov.
If you are overweight, obese, have high blood pressure, unhealthy cholesterol levels and/or high blood sugar, see your health care provider regularly. Follow their recommendations for additional testing, if needed, and for ongoing treatment of your health condition.

In some cases, medications may be required to treat these conditions. If you are prescribed medications, be sure to take them regularly and to carefully follow your health care provider’s instructions.