Despite advances in the diagnosis and treatment of cardiovascular disease (CVD), chronic illness and death from CVD is higher among Black Americans than among White, Hispanic and Asian Americans. African Americans have the greatest chance of having cardiovascular disease. Some of the common risk factors are hypertension, diabetes, obesity, and smoking. This risk is excessive given the smaller number of Blacks in Colorado.
High Blood Pressure

Often known as the “silent killer,” hypertension, also known as high blood pressure, affects one out of every three African Americans. If you are over the age of 65, it is two out of every three.

The reason for the high incidence of high blood pressure in African Americans in the U.S. is not fully known. It is believed that high blood pressure among African Americans is the highest in the world.

African Americans tend to develop high blood pressure earlier in life than others. If ignored or poorly managed the complications can be fatal.

Symptoms of High Blood Pressure

In most cases there are no symptoms; which is why this chronic illness is known as “the silent killer.” It destroys vital organs without you knowing about it. In some cases of uncontrolled high blood pressure, the symptoms may include:

- Vision problems;
- Headaches;
- Chest pain;
- Breathing problems.
Stroke

Strokes occur when an artery to the brain becomes clogged with fatty deposits. The clogged part of the brain begins to starve from lack of blood, oxygen and nutrients causing damage to brain tissue.

There are Two Types of Stroke:

- An Ischemic stroke is caused by a blood clot in the blood vessel in the brain (not enough blood to the brain);
- A Hemorrhagic stroke is caused by a rupture or break of a blood vessel in the brain (too much blood to the brain).

Warning Signs of a Stroke

- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body;
- Sudden confusion; trouble speaking or understanding;
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes;
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination;
- Sudden severe headache with no known cause.
Heart Attack

How does high blood pressure affect the heart? The harder your heart muscle has to work, the thicker your heart muscle will become. This is called hypertrophy or hypertensive heart. This causes the heart to grow larger than normal by thickening the walls in the ventricles (a heart chamber which collects blood).

Increasing systolic blood pressure (the top number) increases the risk for a heart attack. With uncontrolled high blood pressure the heart pumps harder and it becomes more difficult to push blood through smaller and often thicker blood vessels.

Symptoms of a Heart Attack

- Some heart attacks are sudden and intense. Most heart attacks start slowly, with mild pain or discomfort. Often people affected are not sure what is wrong and they wait too long before getting help.

Warning Signs of a Heart Attack

- Chest discomfort – Most heart attacks involve discomfort in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes, or that goes away and comes back. It can feel like pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain.
- Discomfort in areas of the upper body – symptoms can include pain or discomfort in one or both arms, and back. In some cases women can experience pain in the neck, jaw or stomach.
- Other signs – these may include: breaking out in a cold sweat; nausea; light headedness.
Risk Factors

Traits or behaviors that increase your risk for heart disease and stroke are called risk factors. The more risk factors you have, the greater your chance of having a heart attack or stroke. Some risk factors can be changed or treated. Others can not. Those you can not change include increasing age, family history and race.

Risk Factors you CAN NOT change:

- **Age** — The risk for heart attack and stroke increases with age. More African-American men develop heart disease and develop it earlier, but women narrow the gap after age 55. Older women who have heart attacks are more likely than men to die from them within a few weeks.

- **Family History, Race and Ethnicity** — Like your eye color, tendencies for many health conditions can be inherited from one family member to another. As an African American, there is a good chance that you or a relative has high blood pressure.

“Knowing your family health history and taking action is critically important to managing the risks of heart disease.”

Dr. Russell Simpson
Risk Factors you CAN change:

- **Smoking** – If you smoke, STOP! Smoking raises the blood pressure, making the heart work harder to maintain blood flow.

- **High Cholesterol** – Know your numbers to know your risk. A simple blood test can show if your blood cholesterol level is desirable, borderline-high, or high.

- **High Blood Pressure** – You can better manage your high blood pressure through diet, physical activity and taking medications as prescribed.

- **Physical Inactivity** – Physical activity helps maintain normal blood pressure, but few people get the amount of exercise they should to stay healthy.

- **Being Overweight** – As your body weight increases, your blood pressure can rise. In fact, being over weight can make you two to six times more likely to develop high blood pressure than if you are at your desirable weight.

> “Sometimes the risk factors we CAN change are challenging. That’s why it is important to develop strategies for better lifestyle behaviors like making wise food choices, consistent physical activity and managing stress.”

Dr. Terri Richardson
Make Wise Food Choices

Eat less fat such as saturated fat, trans-fat and foods high in cholesterol: Remember, food does not have to be high in fat to taste good. Avoid the following foods:
- Fast foods;
- Store bought baked goods like cookies, cakes and chips;
- Processed foods like packaged meats and snacks;
- Margarine and shortening.

Choose the kinds of fat that can help lower your cholesterol:
- Use a low-fat or fat-free method when cooking;
- Cook with less salt;
- Choose low-fat dairy products.

Choose foods with less fat like:
- Avocado;
- Nuts — almonds, cashews, and peanuts;
- Salmon;
- Albacore tuna.

Choose lean cuts of:
- Beef;
- Pork;
- Skinless poultry;
- Fish.

Other tips:
- Read food nutrition labels carefully;
- Practice eating recommended serving size;
- Eat more foods that are high in fiber;
- Limit your alcohol consumption.
Consistent Physical Activity

More than 50% of American adults do not get enough physical activity to provide health benefits. Physical activity promotes health, improves wellness, and reduces the risk of coronary heart disease. It also decreases the risk of stroke and high blood pressure. You can also lessen CVD by increasing your physical activity.

Ideas for physical activities include:

- Walking
- Weight Training
- Swimming
- Golfing
- Bicycling
- Jogging
- Dancing
- Aerobics

Managing Stress

Stress can cause you to have sustained elevated blood pressure and over time may contribute to chronic high blood pressure that requires medical treatment. Stress management is essential if you are going to reduce your risk of CVD.

Tips for managing stress include:

- Be realistic do not take on more than you can handle;
- Shed the “superman/superwoman” urge. Ask for help when you need it;
- Share your feelings. Talk about your feelings and do not try to cope alone.
Taking Control

Now that you have learned more about cardiovascular disease, the next step is to take action! Check off these items as you do them.

- Know your family health history and share it with other family members.
- Get screened. Know your numbers and what they mean.
- Discuss screening results and your family history with your healthcare provider.
- Ask questions if you do not understand.
- If you smoke, stop!
- Make wise food choices.
- Engage in consistent physical activity.
- Take your medication(s) as prescribed.
- Learn the warning signs of heart attack and stroke in case of emergency.


Mission

The Center for African American Health is committed to improving the health and well being of the African-American community.