



## Does inflammation contribute to heart attack risk?

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We've all heard that cholesterol, being overweight and hypertension contribute to heart attack risk, but there's a new, hidden heart attack trigger on the most wanted list – low-level inflammation. Recent studies show there is a strong correlation between inflammation and heart attack.

What is inflammation? It's swelling – the body's response to injury or illness. Associated with inflammation is a protein that scientists are finding linked strongly to heart attack and stroke.

How do you know if you have chronic, low level inflammation in your body? You can be tested for C-reactive protein (CRP), or you can answer these questions: Do you have gum disease? Are you a smoker or overweight? Are you a chronic couch potato with no energy for activity? If you answered yes even once, you may be harboring a painless, low-level inflammation in your body. This inflammation is likely in your blood vessels.

Recent information shows inflamed blood vessels can eventually lead to heart and blood vessel disease, which in turn leads to heart attack and stroke. Researchers believe that chronic, low-level inflammation is associated with a two to five-fold increase in heart attack and is more dangerous than high cholesterol – which we've been told over and over is a major contributor to heart disease.

If you do have inflammation, how can you reduce it and ward off a heart attack? You can talk to your doctor about taking aspirin or statin drugs. Until then, here are a few easy things to do to decrease inflammation, thus your heart attack risk...

- Stop smoking
- Take care of teeth and gums
- Eat a healthy diet including Omega-3 fatty acids like those found in fish oil supplements
- Lose weight
- Exercise

Physical fitness has a well documented anti-inflammatory effect on the body, so exercise is crucial to heart health. Now don't think you have to be in marathon running shape. Some sort of daily weight bearing exercise or walking should drop your risk. To be in moderate shape, you should be able to walk one and a half miles in 30 to 35 minutes.

Remember, heart health and weight loss are not linked. Studies show out-of-shape folks who improved their diet with fruits and vegetables and exercised 45 minutes daily for only three weeks, lowered their blood pressure and cholesterol significantly even though they lost only a small amount of weight.

And don't think youth gives you an immunity to heart disease – especially if you're overweight. A recent study on the coronary arteries of people aged 15 to 34 who died in accidents showed the more overweight you are, the more fatty streaks in your arteries. These streaks are the beginnings of heart disease.

So start taking care of yourself today and ask you doctor about chronic low-level inflammation. It could save your life.