

Early death - how to reduce your risk

Early death for people in Victoria is most commonly due to illnesses caused by smoking, high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, alcohol misuse, obesity and physical inactivity. Lifestyle changes can prevent many diseases.

A risk factor is something that makes it more likely that you will develop a particular disease or medical condition. Some risk factors, such as age, gender and family history, are beyond your control. However, many lifestyle-related risk factors are very much in your control.

You can dramatically reduce your risk of illness and early death by making a few simple lifestyle changes. Some risk factors that most people can control and change include weight, blood pressure and cholesterol level.

Always consult with your doctor before you change your diet or fitness program, particularly if you are over 40 years old, have a pre-existing medical condition or haven't exercised in a long time.

Risk factors for early deaths for Victorians

The 2001 update of the Victorian Burden of Disease Study examined the most common causes of illness among Victorians. It found that the most common risk factors for disease and early death are similar to those for the rest of the Australian population, which include:

- Tobacco smoking
- High blood pressure
- High blood cholesterol
- Obesity
- Excessive alcohol consumption
- Physical inactivity.

Tobacco smoking

Tobacco smoking is a significant risk factor for various cancers (such as lung cancer), chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and cardiovascular disease. Research suggests that smoking was responsible for about 10 per cent of all cardiovascular deaths throughout the world in 2000.

Healthy lifestyle suggestions include:

- If you smoke, stop as soon as you can.
- Seek professional advice if you find it hard to quit. In the meantime, try to cut back. Research suggests that the risk of cancer, heart disease and respiratory disease is dose-related, which means the risk increases the more cigarettes you smoke. However, that doesn't mean there is a safe level of smoking.

High blood pressure

High blood pressure (hypertension) can cause ischaemic heart disease (blocked arteries in the heart), stroke, hypertensive heart disease, peripheral vascular disease and renal (kidney) failure.

Healthy lifestyle suggestions include:

- Lose excess weight.
- Do more physical activity – ideally, at least 30 minutes every day.
- Eat more fresh fruit and vegetables.

- Reduce or eliminate dietary salt – reducing your salt intake by 3g per day lowers blood pressure, but the effect is doubled with a 6g per day reduction and tripled with a 9g per day reduction. A low-salt diet also reduces your risk of cardiovascular disease.

High blood cholesterol

Cholesterol is a fat-like substance found in the bloodstream. Factors such as heredity, a diet high in saturated fat and various conditions such as type 2 diabetes influence a person's cholesterol level. High blood cholesterol may worsen atherosclerosis (narrowing of the arteries) and influence the development of heart disease and stroke.

Healthy lifestyle suggestions include:

- Reduce the amount of saturated fat (the fat from animal products) in your diet.
- Increase consumption of fresh fruit, vegetables and wholegrain cereals.
- Consume one to two serves of fish per week, particularly oily fish. Studies show that about 100g per week of oily fish – such as salmon – reduces the risk of death from coronary heart disease by 34 per cent and is protective against heart disease and stroke.

Obesity

In 2009, almost half of adult Victorians were categorised as overweight or obese. Excessive body fat carries a higher risk of ill health including heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, colon cancer, gall bladder disease and osteoporosis. Being overweight is also linked to high blood pressure and high blood cholesterol.

Healthy lifestyle suggestions include:

- Lose weight with healthy food choices and regular exercise.
- Plan to lose weight gradually, as crash diets don't work and may even make you put on more weight in the long run.
- Seek professional advice from your doctor or dietitian if losing weight proves difficult.

Excessive alcohol consumption

Excessive long-term drinking increases the risk of cancers of the mouth, pharynx, oesophagus and liver. Smoking **and** excessive alcohol makes things even worse. Tobacco smoking amplifies the cancer-causing effects of alcohol on the upper digestive tract and respiratory tract. Alcohol is also linked to violence and an increased risk of accidental injury.

Healthy lifestyle suggestions include:

- Avoid binge drinking – that is, drinking a large amount of alcohol in a single session.
- Make a conscious effort to reduce your drinking – for example, before you attend a restaurant dinner, decide on a set number of drinks (such as two) and stick to it.
- Reduce your access to alcohol – for example, don't store bulk amounts at home.
- Swap between alcoholic drinks and non-alcoholic beverages – water is ideal – when you are drinking.
- Switch to drinks with a reduced alcohol content if you can – for example, drink light beer instead of full-strength beer.
- Drink wine instead of spirits such as whiskey – spirits are distilled rather than fermented and have a much higher alcohol content.
- Aim for at least two alcohol-free days every week.

Physical inactivity

If you are not active, your risk of cardiovascular disease is increased, especially coronary heart disease. Overweight and obese people are also likely to be sedentary.

Healthy lifestyle suggestions include:

- Do a reasonable amount of exercise at least three times each week ('reasonable' means hard enough to make you puff and sweat).
- Choose a sport or activity you enjoy, because the 'fun factor' dramatically increases your motivation to exercise.
- Start off slowly if you are not used to regular exercise – increase the frequency and intensity as your fitness improves.

- Make sure to check with your doctor before you start any new exercise program – individual factors such as your age or a pre-existing medical condition could make some forms of exercise inappropriate or even harmful.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. 1800 812 942
- Your local community health centre

Things to remember

- You can dramatically reduce your risk of early death by making a few simple lifestyle changes.
- The most common causes of illness and premature death in Victoria include tobacco smoking, high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, obesity, excessive alcohol consumption and physical inactivity.
- Being a non-smoker, eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly and limiting alcohol consumption can reduce your risk of many potentially lethal diseases such as heart disease, stroke and cancer.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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