

Behavioral Counseling to Promote a Healthful Diet and Physical Activity for Cardiovascular Disease Prevention in Adults with Cardiovascular Risk Factors

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (Task Force) has issued a **final** recommendation statement on *Behavioral Counseling to Promote a Healthful Diet and Physical Activity for Cardiovascular Disease (CVD) Prevention in Adults with Cardiovascular Risk Factors*.

This final recommendation statement applies to adults who are overweight or obese and who have at least one other known risk factor for CVD. The Task Force recognizes, however, that all adults, whether they are at increased risk for CVD or not, can improve their health through healthy eating and engaging in physical activity.

What is cardiovascular disease?

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) includes heart disease and stroke.

What are cardiovascular disease risk factors?

CVD risk factors are behaviors or conditions that increase the risk of developing heart disease or having a stroke. They include smoking, high blood cholesterol, high blood pressure, overweight and obesity, diabetes or pre-diabetes.

The final recommendation statement summarizes what the Task Force learned about the potential benefits and harms of behavioral counseling to prevent CVD in overweight or obese adults at increased risk for CVD: Evidence shows that intensive counseling on diet and physical activity can help reduce the risk for CVD. Primary care clinicians should offer or refer their high-risk patients to this counseling.

This fact sheet explains this recommendation and what it might mean for you.

Facts About Cardiovascular Disease Risk Factors and Diet and Physical Activity Counseling

Heart disease and stroke are leading causes of death in the United States, and risk factors for these diseases are very common. Nearly half of adults older than age 20 have high blood pressure or high cholesterol levels that are not well controlled or are current smokers.

One way to help people at increased risk for CVD to lower their risk is through the use of behavioral counseling, or programs that help people make changes to improve their diet and increase physical activity. These programs usually involve a trained counselor who provides education, helps people set goals, shares tools to help promote healthy diet and physical activity behaviors, and regularly follows up with the person. Counselors can include dietitians or nutritionists, physiotherapists or exercise professionals, health educators, psychologists, or other trained professionals.

Because tobacco use is one of the most important risk factors for CVD, another critical way to help people reduce their risk for CVD is to help them quit smoking. The Task Force has a separate recommendation on this topic (see the link to this recommendation at the end of this document).

Potential Benefits and Harms of Behavioral Counseling to Prevent Cardiovascular Disease

The Task Force reviewed studies on the benefits and harms of intensive behavioral counseling to prevent CVD among adults who are overweight or obese and are at increased risk for CVD. Evidence shows that effective programs generally involve multiple sessions of face-to-face or telephone contact, spread out over several months to a year.

The Task Force found that intensive behavioral counseling programs can help adults improve their diet and increase physical activity. These behavior changes can help people reduce their risk for CVD and diabetes (also a risk factor for CVD) through weight loss, lowered blood pressure and cholesterol levels, and improved blood glucose control.

The Task Force found no evidence that behavioral programs to improve diet are harmful. Some evidence did show that intense physical activity can be associated with fatigue or muscle soreness, but serious problems are extremely rare.

The Final Recommendation on Behavioral Counseling to Prevent CVD: What Does It Mean?

Here is the Task Force's final recommendation on behavioral counseling to prevent CVD. It is based on the quality and strength of the evidence about the potential benefits and harms of counseling for this purpose. It also is based on the size of the potential benefits and harms. Task Force recommendation grades are explained in the box at the end of this fact sheet.

When the Task Force recommends a counseling intervention (**Grade B**), it is because it has more potential benefits than potential harms. The Notes explain key ideas.

Visit the Task Force Web site to read the full [final recommendation statement](#). The statement explains the evidence the Task Force reviewed and how it decided on the grade. An [evidence document](#) provides more detail about the studies the Task Force reviewed.

1 The Task Force recommends offering or referring adults who are *overweight and obese* and have additional *cardiovascular disease (CVD) risk factors* to *intensive behavioral counseling interventions* to promote a healthful diet and physical activity for CVD prevention. **Grade B**

Notes

- 1** *overweight and obese*
Overweight and obese refer to ranges of weight that are greater than what is considered healthy for a person's height. Individuals who are overweight or obese are at increased risk for certain diseases and health problems.
- cardiovascular disease*
Heart disease and stroke.
- risk factors*
Smoking, high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, or diabetes or pre-diabetes.
- intensive behavioral counseling interventions*
Programs that help people make changes to improve their diet and increase physical activity. They involve face-to-face and telephone contacts over multiple sessions over several months.

Talking with Primary Care Clinician about Healthy Lifestyles to Prevent CVD

If you have one or more risk factors for heart disease or stroke and have concerns about your weight, talk with your doctor or nurse about things you can do to reduce your risk of CVD. Your doctor or nurse may suggest a behavioral counseling program that can help you make changes to improve your diet and increase physical activity. These programs usually involve education, goal setting, and regular conversations to help you stay on track with new behaviors.

During this conversation, be sure that your questions and concerns are addressed. Think about your life situation, personal beliefs, and preferences for health care. Also, consider scientific recommendations, like this one from the Task Force. Use this information to become fully informed and to decide whether behavioral counseling to prevent CVD is right for you.

What is the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force?

The Task Force is an independent volunteer group of national experts in prevention and evidence-based medicine. The Task Force works to improve the health of all Americans by making evidence-based recommendations about clinical preventive services such as screenings, counseling services, and preventive medicines. The recommendations apply to people with no signs or symptoms of the disease being discussed.

To develop a recommendation statement, Task Force members consider the best available science and research on a topic. For each topic, the Task Force posts draft documents for public comment, including a draft recommendation statement. All comments are reviewed and considered in developing the **final recommendation statement**. To learn more, visit the [Task Force Web site](#).

USPSTF Recommendation Grades	
Grade	Definition
A	Recommended.
B	Recommended.
C	Recommendation depends on the patient's situation.
D	Not recommended.
I statement	There is not enough evidence to make a recommendation.

Click Here to Learn More About Cardiovascular Disease

-  **Heart and Vascular Disease: Health Information for the Public** (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute)
-  **Keep Your Heart Healthy** (healthfinder.gov)
-  **What is Coronary Heart Disease?** (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute)
-  **Million Hearts™** (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)

Click Here to See Related Task Force Recommendations on Preventing Cardiovascular Disease

-  **Behavioral Counseling to Promote a Healthful Diet and Physical Activity for Cardiovascular Disease Prevention in Adults** (June 2012)
-  **Screening for and Management of Obesity in Adults** (June 2012)
-  **Counseling and Interventions to Prevent Tobacco Use and Tobacco-caused Disease in Adults and Pregnant Women** (April 2009)

Click Here to Learn More About Healthy Diet and Physical Activity

-  **Aim for a Healthy Weight** (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute)
-  **ChooseMyPlate.gov** (U.S. Department of Agriculture)
-  **Be Active Your Way: A Guide for Adults** (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)