

# THE IMPORTANCE OF HEALTH CARE CENTERS PROVIDING EASY ACCESS TO HEART-HEALTH SCREENINGS



**E**very year, more than 1.5 million people in the United States suffer a heart attack or stroke. And while death rates due to heart disease have been declining steadily for the last 40 years, this trend appears to be stalling. Deaths in some population groups, including adults ages 35 to 64, are on the rise. The importance of Health Centers is paramount in early detection.

This alarming trend points to the need to focus attention and action on improving the cardiovascular health of all Americans by helping people avoid unhealthy behaviors that put them at risk of heart attack and stroke and improving the care of those with key risk factors.

An important aspect of lowering risk of cardiovascular disease, also called **coronary artery disease** (CAD), is managing health behaviors and risk factors, such as diet quality, physical activity, smoking, body mass index (BMI), blood pressure, total cholesterol or blood glucose. But how do you know which risk factors you have? Your healthcare provider may conduct or request screening tests during regular visits.

Few of us have ideal risk levels on all screening tests. However, if you do have test results that are less than ideal, it doesn't mean you're destined to develop a serious cardiovascular disease. On the contrary, it means you're in a position to begin changing your health in a positive way.

Some measurements such as body weight and blood pressure are taken during routine medical appointments and some cardiovascular screening tests begin at age 20. The frequency of follow up will depend on your level of risk.





You will probably require additional and more frequent testing if you've been diagnosed with a cardiovascular condition such as **heart failure** or **atrial fibrillation**, or if you have a history of **heart attack**, **stroke** or other cardiovascular events. Even if you personally haven't been diagnosed with a condition, your healthcare provider may want stricter screening if you already have risk factors or **family history** of cardiovascular disease.

## Community Health Care Centers provide a good option for health care and screening:

The Health Care Centers are not only a "good safety net" but also offer high quality care and often in more private practice settings.

### Reason One:

The care is truly integrated and medical records can be easily communicated with the patients' medical providers. This reduces the chances of errors and conflicting treatments, such as drug-drug interactions.

### Reason Two:

Many facilities are federally funded health centers that participate in Medicaid programs. These facilities are often the first to know and participate in improvements and innovations. Medicare programs attempt to ensure that health care is delivered in a safe and equitable way, are informed by evidence and guidelines rather than individual ideas and habits. These programs are designed to be responsive to public health needs.

### Reason Three:

Often Community Health Care Centers hire passionate, mission-driven clinicians who believe in what they are doing and care about the populations they serve.

### Finally:

Community Health Care Centers specialize in providing high quality primary care often times at a lower cost.

There are more than 10,000 Community Health Care Centers in the United States providing care for about one in every thirteen Americans (and an even higher proportion in some states). In addition to primary care and behavioral health (i.e., mental health, substance use) services, many also provide dental and vision care. Let's not take Community Health Care Centers for granted.

## Here are key screening tests for monitoring cardiovascular health:

### Blood Pressure

**Blood pressure** is one of the most important screenings because high blood pressure usually has no symptoms so it can't be detected without being measured. High blood pressure can greatly increase your risk of heart disease and stroke. Be sure to get it checked at least once every two years, starting at age 20 if your blood pressure is below 120/80 mm Hg. If your blood pressure is higher, your doctor may want to check it more often. Often high blood pressure can be controlled through lifestyle changes and/or medication.

### Fasting Lipoprotein Profile (cholesterol)

You might have to take a fasting lipoprotein profile every four to six years, starting at age 20. This is a blood test that measures total **cholesterol**, LDL (bad) cholesterol and HDL (good) cholesterol. You may need to be **tested** more frequently if your healthcare provider determines that you're at an increased risk for heart disease or stroke. After age 40, your health care provider will also want to use an equation to calculate your 10-year risk of experiencing cardiovascular disease or stroke. You can check your numbers using AHA's **Check. Change. Control. Calculator** to start the conversation with your health care team.

Like high blood pressure, most often cholesterol can be controlled through lifestyle changes and/or medication.





as heart disease, stroke, atrial fibrillation, congestive heart failure, and more.

### Blood Glucose

High blood glucose or “blood sugar” levels put you at a greater risk of developing insulin resistance, **prediabetes** and **type 2 diabetes**. Left untreated diabetes can lead to many serious medical problems including heart disease and stroke. If you are overweight AND you have at least one additional cardiovascular risk factor, your healthcare provider may recommend a **blood glucose test**. Your healthcare provider may also measure glycated hemoglobin A1c levels (A1c %) in your blood to screen for type 2 diabetes. An A1c level of 6.5% or higher is used to define diabetes.

### Smoking, physical activity, diet

If you smoke, talk to your healthcare provider at your next healthcare visit about approaches to **help quit**. Also discuss your diet and physical activity habits. If there’s room for improvement in your **diet** and daily **physical activity** levels, ask your healthcare provider to provide helpful suggestions.

### Body Weight

Your healthcare provider might ask you for your waist circumference or use body weight to calculate your body mass index (BMI) during your routine visit. These measurements may tell you and your physician whether you’re at a healthy body weight and composition. Being obese puts you at higher risk for health problems such

Recommended Screenings	How Often?
Blood Pressure	Each regular healthcare visit or at least once per year if blood pressure is less than 120/80 mm Hg
Cholesterol (“fasting lipoprotein profile” to measure total, HDL and LDL cholesterol)	Every 4-6 years for normal-risk adults; more often if any you have elevated risk for heart disease and stroke
Weight / Body Mass Index (BMI)	During your regular healthcare visit
Waist circumference	As needed to help evaluate cardiovascular risk if your BMI is greater than or equal to 25 kg/m <sup>2</sup> .
Blood glucose test	At least every 3 years*
Discuss smoking, physical activity, diet	Each regular healthcare visit

\* The American Diabetes Association recommends testing for prediabetes and risk for future diabetes for all people beginning at age 45 years. If tests are normal, it is reasonable to repeat testing at a minimum of 3-year intervals.

