



## Through the Looking Glass: Your Heart, Your Community, Your Health

*By Jeff VanWormer*

For most of us, having a heart attack is the furthest thing from our mind. However, the odds are heart disease will be listed on our death certificate. The good news is you can change your odds and potentially prevent a heart attack by following a few simple steps.

A heart attack occurs when one of the arteries that supplies blood to the heart muscle clots, cuts off the blood supply and destroys part of the heart. What causes this blockage in the first place? The biggest factor is time. Artery blockage begins in adolescence. As you age, arteries become stiff and plaque starts to accumulate inside them. This usually occurs more rapidly if you had a parent who experienced a heart attack before age 60.

Of course, your age and family history are things you can't control. But there are many other things you can control. Below is a list of the top 10 risk factors for a heart attack and how you can keep them in check to stack the odds in your favor to keep heart disease at bay.

- 1) **Avoid tobacco** – It's the single best thing you can do for your health, period.
- 2) **Keep blood cholesterol low** – It's the strongest predictor of a heart attack.
- 3) **Keep blood pressure in check** – It's the strongest predictor of vascular disease, such as stroke and heart disease.
- 4) **Manage diabetes (if you have it)** – As you age, diabetes complicates most chronic health conditions and often leads to heart disease.
- 5) **Maintain a healthy weight** – Obesity is the most common lifestyle cause of high cholesterol and high blood pressure.
- 6) **Eat more fruits/vegetables** – Low-fat, low-calorie foods like fruits and vegetables are packed with nutrients that have a powerful effect on your health.
- 7) **Lead an active lifestyle** – Move your body every day to maintain a healthy weight, and keep your blood pressure and cholesterol in check.



- 8) **Drink alcohol in moderation** – Moderate amounts (less than 2 drinks per day) is associated with fewer heart attacks.
- 9) **Manage stress** – Unmanaged stress can make it hard to stay active and eat healthy.
- 10) **See your doctor regularly and, if necessary, take your medications** – Your doctor can put your heart attack risk profile together, monitor your progress and deliver preventive therapies.

For most people, this list reflects “the simple things that are hard to do.” But, there are resources to make it easier for you. Working in partnership with New Ulm Medical Center, a series of workshops are being held throughout the summer to help you and your loved ones address these risk factors and improve your overall health.

In addition, you can participate in the Heart of New Ulm heart health screenings, offered at no charge at various sites around the community this summer. These screenings will help you assess your personal risk for having a heart attack and what you can do about it today. You can sign-up for screenings or presentations on the web at [www.heartofnewulm.org](http://www.heartofnewulm.org) or by phone at 507-233-1945.

By knowing your risks and getting support to manage them, you empower yourself to take charge of the choices that influence your health, and the health of your friends and family.

This column will be published monthly to help provide you with tips, interest stories and timely updates/advice on how you can stay healthy, live longer and feel great. Together, we can make heart attacks less common in New Ulm and across the country.

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