

Anger Arresters

Chill out... and lower your risk of heart disease

Remember the scene in the movie where a character, usually an older, overweight man, has an angry outburst so severe that he clutches his chest, has a heart attack, and dies? Unfortunately, this scenario is more fact than fiction. Anger can kill.

In the 1960s, when the first studies on Type A personality were done, researchers found scientific evidence that being aggressive, driven, competitive, and time-pressured can physically damage your heart. Medical studies in recent years have shown that the most damaging aspects of a Type A personality are anger and hostility.

Angry people, especially men, have a higher risk of heart problems. A personality profile that includes irritability, getting angry easily, and frequent outbursts may double or even triple your risk of heart disease, including angina and heart attack. Getting angry even raises your cholesterol level.

When you become angry, your heart rate increases and your blood pressure goes up. At the same time, your heart needs more oxygen to function at its faster speed. Arteries already narrowed from a buildup of plaque may constrict to become even narrower, so blood has more trouble flowing through them. Meanwhile, the platelets in your blood begin to clot more easily, potentially narrowing your arteries further or even causing a blockage. These are prime conditions for a heart attack or stroke.

It would be easy to simply say, "Don't ever lose your temper or feel hostile again," but that's not a realistic possibility for most people. However, you can learn ways to deal with your anger to keep yourself on a more even keel and protect your heart from unnecessary damage.

Manage your anger to protect your heart

If you think you should just hold an explosive case of anger in check, think again. Researchers have discovered a new type of personality to describe the kind of person who holds his emotions inside – Type D. Instead of being openly aggressive and hostile like a Type A personality might, someone with a Type D personality is just as angry and hostile, but covers it up and holds onto the anger. If you are a Type D person who simply swallows emotional distress like a bitter pill, you may need to make some adjustments. If you have heart disease, your chances of death are four times higher than people who aren't Type D.

Letting your anger seethe like a simmering pot will eventually cause your body to release stress hormones. These hormones cause your blood pressure to go up and your arteries to narrow. They can also weaken your immune system, making you more susceptible to attack by passing viruses and bacteria. Anger kept at a slow boil can show up in other physical problems, too, including overeating and alcohol abuse. These habits contribute further to poor heart health.

But you don't have to hold your anger inside all the time. With practice, anger can be managed and controlled. Having a plan to deal with your anger gives you the tools you need to defuse a heart-hurting situation. Get familiar with this list and use whichever tools work best for you.

When you feel anger rising, try these techniques to regain control:

- **Take deep breaths.** You'll help get much-needed oxygen to your racing heart and help yourself calm down and relax. That old saying about counting to 10 is good advice, too. Just count slowly and think calming thoughts.
- **Express it, then forget it.** If you express your anger, do so in a constructive way. Wait until you are calm and can say what you need to without exploding. State clearly why you are angry, but try not to accuse others if you can help it. You might be able to bring about positive change in a situation. But even if nothing changes, express yourself, then

let it go. No matter how important an issue seems to you at the time, letting it drop is much better for your heart than holding onto it and fuming inside.

- **Talk it out.** Talking with a loved one or close friend about an issue that is angering you will usually help you get a clearer perspective. You may find that the issue isn't worth exploring any further, or you may come up with a good plan of attack to solve the problem.
- **Give the other guy a break.** Always competing, getting angry with having to wait, and passing everyone on the highway is a way of life for some people. This anger and stress can hurt your heart. Try letting go and letting the other guy win sometimes. You may find that once you stop competing, the other person will stop and behave more graciously, too.

Now that you're prepared to contend with anger in the moment, consider the following steps for coping with your anger over the long haul. Even though you may not get immediate results, stick with them, and you should see dramatic improvements in your ability to keep your cool.

- **Exercise.** Along with strengthening your heart and lowering your blood pressure, regular exercise reduces stress and gives you a feeling of well-being. If you're feeling angry, a long walk may be just the thing to turn your mood around. Schedule time to exercise at least three days a week for 20 minutes or longer at a stretch.
- **Help others.** If you're angry much of the time, it might be because you're focusing on yourself and your feelings. Try doing some volunteer work or helping out a neighbor who could use a hand. Giving of yourself helps you see the larger picture and can generate both positive feelings and goodwill in return.
- **Work it off.** If you feel like striking out at someone, try aiming your energy in another direction. Clean out a closet, do some weeding in the garden, or cook a healthy meal. You can accomplish something positive, work off some of your angry energy, and give yourself a little time and distance to cool off.

- **Meditate.** Learning to meditate can help you put events in your life into better perspective. Instead of getting angry about the countless little things that can go wrong in a day, choose to let go of them so anger never arises at all. Save your anger for the things that really matter and use it to spur you into action.
- **Avoid the issue.** Perhaps the smartest way to deal with anger is to avoid situations you know will cause it. If shopping in crowded stores infuriates you, shop on Tuesday nights when the crowds tend to be thinner instead of on Saturdays or the day after Thanksgiving. If traffic makes you crazy, arrange your work schedule to avoid rush hour. If discussing politics with your brother-in-law always leads to an argument, don't be drawn into such a conversation. You can choose to live your life in ways that lead to a calmer, happier attitude and a healthier heart.