

For adults younger than 78, risk for heart disease linked to risk for problems walking

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Problems with balance, walking speed, and muscle strength become more common as we age, and can lead to disability. In fact, studies show that for older adults, having a slower walking speed can help predict chronic illness, hospitalization, and even death.

A team of researchers from Sweden's Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm examined the factors that put [older adults](#) at higher risk for developing physical limitations as they age. The team studied information from the Swedish National Study on Aging and Care-Kungsholmen (SNAC-K), and published their research in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*.

The researchers studied participants aged 60 or older who lived in Stockholm and who did not have [heart disease](#) at the start of the study. When the study began, participants did not have problems with walking speed, balance, or chair standing exercises. All of these measure your risk for falls.

The researchers enrolled participants from 2001 to 2004. Follow-up information was taken every six years for younger participants (60 year olds, 66 year olds, and 72 year olds). Information was taken every three years for participants aged 78 and older.

Researchers considered [participants' physical activity levels](#), alcohol consumption, [body mass index](#) (BMI, a ratio of weight to height), and ability to think and make decisions. Participants' blood levels of C-

reactive protein (CRP) were tested, too. High CRP levels point to a higher risk for heart disease, which remains a serious concern for older people.

The research team learned four key facts:

- The more risk factors people had for heart disease, the faster their decline in walking speed.
- The link between heart disease risk factors and walking difficulties was only present in people under the age of 78.
- Cognitive function (the ability to think and make decisions) did not play a role in the link between risk factors for [heart](#) disease and walking limitations.
- Heart disease risk factors were not linked to balance problems or the ability to do the chair stand exercise.

Heart disease risk factors such as smoking, living with diabetes, obesity, or being physically inactive were linked to having a slower walking speed. The researchers concluded that reducing [heart disease risk](#) factors with appropriate treatments might help "younger" older adults maintain their physical function.

More information: Emerald G. Heiland et al, Cardiovascular Risk Burden and Future Risk of Walking Speed Limitation in Older Adults, *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/jgs.15158](#)

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