

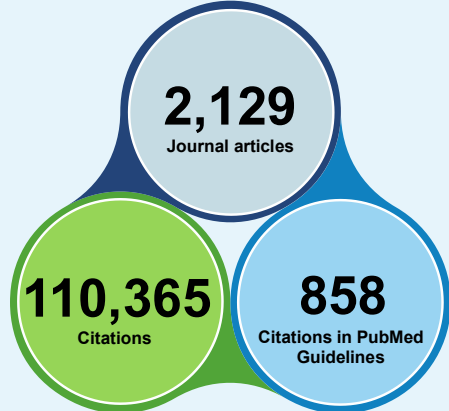
Cardiovascular disease

This brief summarizes the contributions of Kaiser Permanente Research since 2012 on the topic of cardiovascular disease. Although CVD encompasses a wide array of health conditions, this brief will focus primarily on research related to stroke, coronary heart disease, and heart failure.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, cardiovascular disease is responsible for more than 700,000 deaths in the United States each year.¹ Though mostly preventable, it remains the leading cause of death in both men and women, and across nearly all racial and ethnic groups nationally.¹ Coronary heart disease, or the accumulation of atherosclerotic plaque within the arterial vessels of the heart, is the most common form of heart disease, and is associated with more than 370,000 deaths each year.¹ An estimated 6.7 million Americans also suffer from heart failure, or the heart's inability to pump sufficient blood and oxygen to the body's organ systems.² Heart failure is considered a contributing cause in approximately 1 in 8 deaths.² Stroke, or a disruption in the blood supply to the brain caused by a burst or blocked blood vessel, occurs in nearly 800,000 Americans each year.² Stroke kills approximately 160,000 Americans annually,² and is a leading cause of significant long-term disability, with consequences that often require long-term skilled nursing care.³

Cardiovascular disease is an active area of study for Kaiser Permanente Research. Scientists across the organization have used our rich, comprehensive, longitudinal data to advance knowledge in the areas of understanding risk, improving patient outcomes, and translating research findings into policy and practice. We have published more than 2,100 articles related to CVD since 2012.⁴ Together, these articles have been cited over 110,000 times. These articles are the product of observational studies, randomized controlled trials, meta-analyses, and other studies led by Kaiser Permanente scientists. Our unique environment — a fully integrated care and coverage model in which our research scientists, clinicians, medical groups, and health plan leaders collaborate — enables us to contribute important knowledge about CVD, and many other research topics.

Kaiser Permanente publications related to cardiovascular disease since 2012



Source: Kaiser Permanente Publications Library and Scite metrics, as of November 22, 2024.

Understanding risk

Who is at risk for developing cardiovascular disease?

Kaiser Permanente scientists have assessed a variety of cardiovascular disease risk factors in adults,⁵⁻⁷ including diabetes,⁸⁻¹³ atrial fibrillation,^{14; 15} high blood pressure,^{8; 16-25} high cholesterol,^{8; 13; 21; 26; 27} smoking,^{8; 28; 29} obesity,^{30; 31} insulin resistance,³¹ kidney disease,³²⁻³⁶ HIV,^{37; 38} infection with respiratory viruses,^{39; 40} diet,^{29; 41-45} physical activity and fitness,^{29; 46-50} stressful life events and social isolation,⁵¹⁻⁵³ socioeconomic status,⁵⁴ environmental factors,⁵⁵⁻⁵⁸ biomarkers,⁵⁹⁻⁶² age,⁶³ race,⁶³ and genetics.⁶⁴⁻⁷⁰ Our researchers have also studied CVD risk factors within pediatric populations,⁷¹ including challenges in the family environment,⁷² poor maternal cardiovascular health,⁷³ congenital heart defects,⁷⁴ high blood pressure,⁷⁵⁻⁷⁷ and obesity.⁷⁸⁻⁸⁰ Recent studies have also suggested that neighborhood and socioeconomic factors are implicated in the development of CVD.^{81; 82}

In large part because of Kaiser Permanente's emphasis on prevention,^{83; 84} persistently high cholesterol⁸⁵ and uncontrolled blood pressure⁸⁶⁻⁸⁸ are much less common among our members than in the broader U.S. population. In addition, the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic disparities in these risk factors seen nationally are notably smaller among our members.⁸⁹⁻⁹³

What other health risks do people with cardiovascular disease face?

People with CVD face several associated health risks. While death is a well-known consequence of many cardiovascular diseases,⁹⁴⁻¹⁰² superior risk-factor control within Kaiser Permanente has reduced fatal and nonfatal CVD rates among our members.¹⁰³⁻¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, CVD carries other significant risks, including cognitive decline,¹⁰⁸⁻¹¹⁴ dementia,¹¹⁵⁻¹¹⁷ reduced physical function,¹¹⁸ long-term disability¹¹⁹ and the need for long-term post-acute care following stroke,¹²⁰⁻¹²³ and repeated hospitalization among patients with heart failure.¹²⁴⁻¹²⁹ Our scientists have highlighted the unique challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has posed for optimal management of cardiovascular illness.¹³⁰⁻¹³⁹

Moreover, the medications used to treat various cardiovascular diseases carry significant risks and side effects.^{140; 141} Patients receiving anticoagulants for prevention of stroke may be at increased risk of severe bleeding events,¹⁴²⁻¹⁴⁵ myocardial infarction,¹⁴⁶ and death.¹⁴⁷ In addition, common treatments for heart failure and high blood pressure can have serious side effects, including high blood potassium,¹⁴⁸ serious injuries from falls,^{149; 150} and risk of adverse neonatal outcomes.^{151; 152}

Physical fitness insights

Kaiser Permanente researchers have published important insights about physical fitness using data from CARDIA, a 30-year study of CVD risks and causes in 5,115 young adults in 4 U.S. cities.



Greater fitness in young adulthood is associated with superior heart function in middle age.



Short bursts of exercise (<10 minutes) can reduce the risk of high blood pressure.



Active commuting to work is associated with lower BMI, blood pressure, and cholesterol.



Walking or cycling to neighborhood amenities is associated with lower BMI and lower lifetime CVD risk.

Improving Patient Outcomes

What strategies are effective in preventing cardiovascular disease?

Prevention strategies in CVD focus primarily on measuring and treating risk factors. Kaiser Permanente tracks nearly all of the American Heart Association's "Life's Essential 8" cardiovascular health metrics,¹⁵³ including physical activity,¹⁵⁴⁻¹⁶⁰ sleep quality,^{161; 162} obesity,¹⁶³ blood pressure,^{86-88; 164-166} cholesterol,^{26; 167; 168} and smoking,¹⁵⁴ and uses them to measure treatment response and perform ongoing surveillance.¹⁶⁹ This work is conducted by teams led by primary care physicians.^{164; 170-172} Screening also plays a significant role in CVD prevention. For example, early identification of elevated blood pressure has been shown to improve outcomes in adult patients.^{173; 174} Our researchers have also studied prehospital screening strategies for patients with suspected strokes,¹⁷⁵ risk scoring and care pathway systems for evaluating patients entering the emergency department with chest pain,^{176; 177} and targeted cholesterol screening in pediatric patients.^{178; 179}

What are the key factors in effective treatment of cardiovascular disease?

Risk-factor management: In addition to direct treatment of CVD, ongoing risk-factor management is a critical component of the care of these patients. Studies conducted in Kaiser Permanente have found improved outcomes from smoking cessation interventions,^{180; 181} dietary advice,¹⁸¹⁻¹⁸³ and physical activity^{181; 184-188} interventions in patients with CVD. Self-monitoring in conjunction with counseling, education, and assistance with medication management,^{183; 189-196} disease management for heart failure patients in skilled nursing facilities,^{197; 198} home-based cardiac rehabilitation,¹⁹⁹ and the provision of additional support to primary care physicians²⁰⁰ have all been associated with improved outcomes, and with reductions in racial disparities.

Pharmacotherapy:

Medications are an established component of evidence-based care for both CVD management and control of risk factors. While a discussion of specific medications is beyond the scope of this brief, our researchers have led or collaborated on key studies exploring the efficacy and safety of numerous medications in CVD populations. These have included key studies of

glucose-lowering medications for control of type 2 diabetes and prevention of cardiovascular complications of diabetes,²⁰¹⁻²⁰³ drugs to lower blood pressure,^{86; 204-211} and cholesterol-lowering medications,²¹²⁻²¹⁵ as well as recent studies of anticoagulant treatments for stroke prevention among patients with atrial fibrillation,^{146; 216-219} and medications for acute or chronic heart failure.²²⁰⁻²²⁹

Given its importance in the care of patients with CVD, medication adherence has also been a significant focus of research in Kaiser Permanente. Large cohort studies conducted by our scientists have found that nonadherence to medications such as ACE inhibitors, oral anticoagulants, statins, and beta-blockers is

Kaiser Permanente employs effective strategies to help patients with CVD



Telestroke

Rates of tissue plasminogen activator administration for acute stroke increased in emergency departments with an on-call neurologist available by phone.^{271; 272}



Refills by mail

Patients enrolled in a mail-order pharmacy program were more likely to adhere to recommended hypertension treatment.¹⁶⁵



Interactive voice response

In a randomized trial, statin adherence and cholesterol control were enhanced by IVR reminders.²⁴⁰⁻²⁴³

associated with increased risks for all-cause and cardiovascular mortality, revascularization (an invasive medical procedure that restores blood flow to blocked or narrowed coronary arteries), cardiovascular hospitalization, and other serious cardiovascular events.^{212; 230-232} A large study of at-risk members starting statins found that 84% were still receiving them 1 year later, but only 42% had experienced no treatment gaps during that time.²³³ The trend of suboptimal preventive use of statins has proven difficult to reverse, as shown by a national-level study conducted by Kaiser Permanente scientists.^{234; 235} Furthermore, patients at lower CVD risk are less likely to comply with prescribed statin therapy.²³⁶ We have evaluated several medication-adherence interventions for patients with CVD involving clinical pharmacist^{164; 237} or community health worker^{238; 239} outreach, interactive voice response calls and reporting,²⁴⁰⁻²⁴³ mail-order pharmacy programs,¹⁶⁵ or web-based medication self-management.²⁴⁴

Other secondary prevention: In addition to medication and lifestyle modifications, surgical procedures (including heart transplantation) and device implantation are also components of CVD management in targeted patients. Coronary revascularization has been studied extensively within Kaiser Permanente, including research on geographic variations in the use of this family of technologies.²⁴⁵ Studies have found that improved patient outcomes are associated with the appropriate use of specific invasive procedures,²⁴⁶⁻²⁵³ particular clinical characteristics,²⁵⁴⁻²⁵⁸ surgeons who perform more procedures,²⁵⁹ and improved practices for managing blood clots.²⁶⁰

For patients with certain severe heart conditions, heart transplantation is an important treatment strategy. Our researchers have found that receiving a heart from a donor with diabetes mellitus,²⁶¹ having a history of transplant rejection,²⁶² and experiencing longer wait times before transplantation²⁶³ are associated with poorer heart transplant outcomes. Another study described a DNA-based method for noninvasive diagnosis of heart transplant rejection,²⁶⁴ increasing the ease of post-transplant monitoring. Our research on implantable cardiac defibrillator, or ICD, usage has explored how often these devices are used in non-guideline-directed fashion.²⁶⁵ Scientists at Kaiser Permanente have also found that preventive ICD implantation is not consistently performed in patients at high risk of sudden cardiac death.²⁶⁶ Other studies have found that mortality outcomes in patients with ICDs are associated with heart function, the heart's structure,¹²⁵ and higher BMI (body mass index),²⁶⁷ and have evaluated algorithms for the prediction of survival and sudden death in these patients.^{268; 269}

Translating Research Findings Into Policy and Practice

As part of a learning health care organization that uses research to inform and improve practice, Kaiser Permanente's research, clinical, and operational partners have tested a range of interventions to reduce the risk of CVD and improve outcomes for patients with established CVD. For example, research supporting the efficacy of combining ACE inhibitors and thiazide diuretics in a single pill for blood pressure management and protocol-driven medication and dose adjustments led to broad adoption of these practices in Kaiser Permanente's blood pressure management program.⁸⁷ Our research in acute stroke management²⁷⁰ has led to implementation of effective telestroke programs with an on-call neurologist available via telemedicine technology to emergency department physicians in our Northern California²⁷¹ and Southern California regions.²⁷² More recently, our scientists have used artificial intelligence techniques to develop risk prediction tools for patients entering the emergency department with acute heart failure,²⁷³⁻²⁷⁵ and participated in developing and validating the American Heart Association's PREVENT equations for prediction of cardiovascular risks.²⁷⁶ However, our work has also underscored many of the barriers to the use of similar risk calculators in primary care settings.²⁷⁷

Heart attacks and high blood pressure rates

Thanks to interventions validated by our researchers, rates of heart attacks and high blood pressure dropped sharply in Kaiser Permanente Northern California between 1999 and 2014.

	1999	2014
% with high blood pressure ²⁰⁵	54%	10%
Heart attacks per 100,000 members ¹⁰⁴	274	185

Collectively, research from Kaiser Permanente authors has been cited nearly 860 times within recent consensus statements and clinical practice guidelines published by a wide range of entities, including the American Stroke Association and American Heart Association.²⁷⁸ In addition, our researchers and clinician scientists have directly contributed as authors of 3 hypertension guidelines,²⁷⁹⁻²⁸¹ as well as other guidelines published by the American College of Chest Physicians,²⁸² the American College of Cardiology, the American Heart Association, and The Obesity Society,²⁸³ the American College of Cardiology and other societies,²⁸⁴ the American Heart Association,²⁸⁵⁻²⁹¹ the Western Vascular Society,²⁹² the Society for Vascular Surgery,^{293; 294} the Lancet Commission on Hypertension,²⁹⁵ the American Academy of Neurology,²⁹⁶ the Heart Failure Society of America,²⁹⁷ and the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force.²⁹⁸⁻³⁰⁶ Kaiser Permanente researchers have also participated in the Implementation Science

Work Group on CVD guidelines convened by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI),³⁰⁷ a workshop on hypertension control sponsored by the NHLBI and the CDC,³⁰⁸ NHLBI workshops on research regarding measurement of modifiable CVD risk factors, heart failure and atrial fibrillation,³⁰⁹⁻³¹⁵ an expert panel on cardiac rehabilitation for patients with heart failure,³¹⁶ the HEARTs in the Americas Innovation Group,³¹⁷⁻³¹⁹ and the “Bending the Curve in Cardiovascular Disease Mortality” symposium sponsored by NHLBI and the American Heart Association.³²⁰ Our scientists have also participated in regional health collaboratives in the city of San Diego and Sonoma County aimed at reducing the burden of cardiovascular disease.^{321; 322} Finally, the hypertension management efforts implemented in our California regions^{86; 87} have received widespread recognition,³²³ particularly with respect to reducing racial disparities in blood pressure control.³²⁴

Kaiser Permanente has shown considerable leadership in the field of CVD research. We have endorsed and actively supported the Department of Health and Human Services’ Million Hearts Initiative,³²⁵ and our Colorado,³²⁶ Northern California,³²⁷ and Georgia³²⁸ regions have been recognized as Million Hearts Hypertension Control Champions. Kaiser Permanente has supported care improvement efforts in safety net health care providers that operate in the same communities.³²⁹ Our researchers have led or collaborated on many notable studies related to epidemiology, prevention, risk factors, and treatment of CVD, including the Coronary Artery Risk Development in Young Adults (CARDIA) study, the Cardiovascular Research Network (CVRN), the Effectiveness of Gastric Bypass Versus Gastric Sleeve for Cardiovascular Disease (ENGAGE CVD) study, the Cardiovascular Health of HAPO Offspring (a substudy of the Hyperglycemia and Adverse Pregnancy Outcomes Study), and the Anticoagulation and Risk Factors in Atrial Fibrillation (ATRIA) study, all of which have been sponsored by the NIH’s National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute.

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