Behavioral Counseling Interventions to Promote a Healthy Diet and Physical Activity to Prevent CVD in Adults Without Risk Factors

The US Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) has recently published recommendations on behavioral counseling interventions to promote a healthy diet and physical activity to prevent cardiovascular disease (CVD) in adults without CVD risk factors.

Cardiovascular disease refers to the buildup of plaque, which causes blockages inside important blood vessels in the body, including the arteries of the heart (coronary heart disease) and brain (cerebrovascular disease). Cardiovascular disease can cause heart attacks and strokes and is the leading cause of death in the US.

Modifiable risk factors for CVD include smoking, high blood pressure, being overweight or obese, diabetes, high cholesterol, lack of physical activity, and an unhealthy diet.

What Does Counseling on Healthy Diet and Physical Activity Involve?
A healthy diet is defined as a balance of foods and beverages that help a person achieve and maintain a healthy weight, support health, and prevent disease. Behavioral counseling to promote a healthy diet focuses on (1) increased consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, fat-free or low-fat dairy, lean proteins, and plant-based oils; (2) decreased consumption of foods or beverages that are high in added sugars, saturated or trans fats, and salt (sodium); and (3) moderation of alcohol intake.

Physical activity enhances or maintains overall health and physical fitness. It is recommended that adults engage in at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity per week in addition to strength-training activity at least twice per week.

Behavioral counseling involves behavior change techniques such as goal setting, active use of self-monitoring, and addressing barriers related to diet and physical activity. Dietary counseling can provide patient-tailored approaches such as advice about appropriate portion sizes and how to read food labels and prepare healthy meals. Counseling about physical activity typically involves tailored advice about how to gradually increase aerobic activity.

Counseling can be done by primary care clinicians as well as other trained professionals, including nurses, registered dietitians, nutritionists, exercise specialists, psychologists, and lifestyle coaches. Counseling sessions can be performed in person or remotely and may be done individually or in group sessions.

What Is the Patient Population Under Consideration for Counseling About Healthy Diet and Physical Activity?
This USPSTF recommendation applies to adults without known CVD risk factors. There is a separate USPSTF recommendation for counseling about healthy diet and physical activity for adults who have CVD risk factors.

What Are the Potential Benefits and Harms of Counseling About Healthy Diet and Physical Activity?
There is some evidence that counseling about healthy diet and physical activity leads to improvements in body weight, blood pressure, and cholesterol levels. However, there is less direct evidence linking behavioral counseling to CVD outcomes such as heart attacks, strokes, or death from CVD. Any harms from counseling about healthy diet and physical activity are likely to be small.

How Strong Is the Recommendation to Counsel About Healthy Diet and Physical Activity?
Based on the current evidence, the USPSTF concludes with moderate certainty that behavioral counseling interventions have a small net benefit on CVD risk in adults without CVD risk factors. Individuals who are interested in and ready to make behavioral changes may be most likely to benefit from counseling.