



What are Heart Disease and Stroke?

There are various types of heart and blood vessel diseases. Many of them can be prevented when you take these key steps:

- Don't smoke and avoid second-hand smoke.
- Lower your blood pressure if it's high.
- Eat a heart-healthy diet low in saturated fat, sodium (salt) and added sugars. Avoid trans fats.
- Be physically active.
- Reach and maintain a healthy weight.
- Control your blood sugar if you have diabetes.
- Get regular medical checkups.
- Take your medications as prescribed.

Over time, fatty deposits called plaque develop in the walls of the arteries that supply blood to the heart or brain.



If the plaque becomes unstable and ruptures, a clot begins to form inside the artery.



As the clot grows, blood flow is reduced and the heart or brain tissue can start to die.



If the clot completely blocks the artery or breaks off, a heart attack or stroke can occur.



What are some types of heart and blood vessel diseases?

Hardening of the arteries, or atherosclerosis, is when the inner walls of arteries become narrower due to a buildup of plaque (usually caused by high levels of cholesterol and triglycerides in the blood, cigarette smoking, diabetes or high blood pressure). This limits the flow of blood to the heart and brain. Sometimes, this plaque can break open. When this happens, a blood clot forms and blocks blood flow in the artery. This can cause a heart attack or stroke.

High blood pressure, also called hypertension, means the pressure in your arteries is consistently above the normal range. Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against blood vessel walls. It's recorded as two numbers, such as 122/78 mm Hg. The top number (systolic) is the pressure when the heart beats. The bottom number (diastolic) is the pressure when the heart rests between beats. Normal blood pressure is below 120/80 mm Hg. High blood pressure is a systolic pressure of 130 or higher or a diastolic pressure of 80 or higher that stays high over time. HBP can lead to hardened arteries, heart attack, heart failure and stroke.

You can have high blood pressure and not know it. HBP usually has no symptoms. That's why it's called the "silent killer." The only way to find out if you have HBP is to have your blood pressure measured. Your health care professional can check it for you.

Heart attacks occur when the blood flow to a part of the heart is blocked, usually by a blood clot. If this clot cuts off blood flow completely, the part of the heart muscle supplied by that artery begins to die.

Here are some of the signs of a heart attack:

- Uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain in the center of your chest that lasts more than a few minutes or goes away and returns
- Pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach
- Shortness of breath with or without chest discomfort
- Breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea or lightheadedness

As with men, women's most common heart attack symptom is chest pain (angina) or discomfort. But women are somewhat more likely than men to experience some of the other common symptoms, particularly shortness of breath, nausea/vomiting and back or jaw pain.

Call 911 immediately if you have one or more of these signs. This is almost always the fastest way to get treatment.

Heart failure means that your heart isn't pumping blood as well as it should. As a result, your body isn't getting all

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the blood and oxygen it needs to function properly. See a doctor if you notice any of these symptoms:

- Swelling in feet, ankles and legs, called “edema”
- Fluid buildup in the lungs, called “pulmonary edema”

Stroke occurs when a blood vessel that feeds the brain gets blocked or bursts. When that happens, part of the brain can’t get the blood (and oxygen) it needs. Brain tissue then begins to die.

A transient ischemic attack (**TIA**) is often called a mini-stroke but it’s really a warning stroke. Most TIA symptoms only last a few minutes and the symptoms generally resolve within an hour (but may last up to 24 hours).

Major risk factors for stroke include:

- High blood pressure
- Smoking or exposure to secondhand smoke
- Diabetes
- High cholesterol
- Heart disease
- Atrial fibrillation (abnormal heart rhythm)

Call 911 to get help fast if you have any of these warning signs of stroke and TIA:

- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination
- Sudden, severe headache with no known cause

F.A.S.T. is an easy way to remember how to recognize a stroke and what to do: **F**ace drooping. **A**rm weakness. **S**peech Difficulty. **T**ime to call 911.

HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

- 1** Call **1-800-AHA-USA1** (1-800-242-8721), or visit [heart.org](https://www.heart.org) to learn more about heart disease and stroke.
- 2** Sign up for our monthly *Heart Insight* e-news for heart patients and their families at [HeartInsight.org](https://www.heartinsight.org).
- 3** Connect with others sharing similar journeys with heart disease and stroke by joining our Support Network at [heart.org/SupportNetwork](https://www.heart.org/SupportNetwork).

Do you have questions for your doctor or nurse?

Take a few minutes to write down your questions for the next time you see your health care professional.

For example:

How can I reduce my risk of heart disease and stroke?

What medicines may help me?

MY QUESTIONS:

We have many other fact sheets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk for heart disease, manage your condition or care for a loved one. Visit [heart.org/AnswersByHeart](https://www.heart.org/AnswersByHeart) to learn more.