



## What are Heart Disease and Stroke?

There are many types of heart and blood vessel diseases. Many of them can be prevented. Here are some key steps you can take:

- Don't smoke, and avoid second-hand smoke.
- Lower your blood pressure if it's high.
- Eat a healthy diet low in saturated fat, *trans* fat, and sodium (salt).
- Be physically active.
- Reach and maintain a healthy weight.
- Get regular medical check-ups.
- Follow your doctor's orders for taking medicine.
- Control your blood sugar if you have diabetes.

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



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



As the clot continues to grow, 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 a diet high in fat, cigarette smoking, diabetes or hypertension). 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 written 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. High blood

pressure is a pressure of 140 systolic or higher and/ or 90 diastolic or higher that stays high over time.

The danger is that you usually can't tell you have high blood pressure! There are no signs, so you must see a doctor every year. Also, no one knows exactly what causes it. Yet, high blood pressure can lead to hardened arteries, stroke or heart attack.

**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 the 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. It lasts more than a few minutes, or goes away and comes back.

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- Pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach.
- Shortness of breath with or without chest discomfort.
- Other signs such as breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea or lightheadedness.

If you have one or more of these signs, immediately call for help. **Call 9-1-1...Get to a hospital right away.**

**HEART FAILURE** means that your heart isn't pumping blood as well as it should. It keeps working, but the body doesn't get all the blood and oxygen it needs. See a doctor if you notice any of these symptoms:

- Swelling in feet, ankles and legs, called "edema".
- Fluid build-up in the lungs, called "pulmonary congestion".

**STROKE and TIA** happen when a blood vessel that feeds the brain gets blocked or bursts. Then that part of the brain can't work and neither can the part of the body it controls. Major risk factors for stroke include:

- High blood pressure
- Smoking
- Diabetes
- High cholesterol
- Heart disease
- Atrial fibrillation (abnormal heart rhythm)

**Call 9-1-1** 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. Spot a stroke **F**AST. **F**ace drooping. **A**rm weakness. **S**peech difficulty. **T**ime to call 9-1-1.

## HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

- 1 Call **1-800-AHA-USA1** (1-800-242-8721), or visit **heart.org** to learn more about heart disease and stroke.
- 2 Sign up to get *Heart Insight*, a free magazine for heart patients and their families, at **heartinsight.org**.
- 3 Connect with others sharing similar journeys with heart disease and stroke by joining our Support Network at **heart.org/supportnetwork**.

## Do you have questions for the doctor or nurse?

Take a few minutes to write your questions for the next time you see your healthcare provider.

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, manage disease or care for a loved one. Visit **heart.org/answersbyheart** to learn more.