



## What Is Heart Disease?

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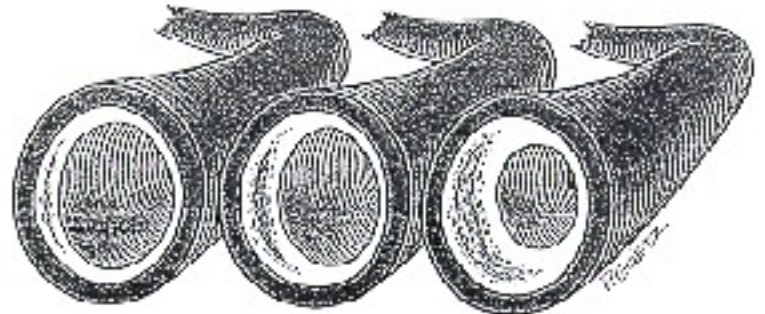
There are many types of heart and blood vessel diseases. Over 60 million Americans have one or more of them. In 1993, more than 950,000 people died from them -- over 42 percent of all deaths in the United States! Yet many types of heart disease may be prevented.

The keys are to:

- Stop smoking.
- Lower your blood pressure.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Be physically active.
- Get regular medical checkups

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Heart and blood vessel problems develop over time, when arteries that supply the heart or brain with blood slowly become clogged from a buildup of cells, fat and cholesterol. This buildup is called plaque. When the blood flow gets blocked, you could have a heart attack or stroke.



**HARDENING OF THE ARTERIES** or atherosclerosis, is when the inner walls of arteries become more narrow due to buildup of plaque. Blood clots form, so less blood can get through. This can cause heart attacks and strokes.

**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 mmHg. The top, systolic number is the pressure when the heart beats. The bottom, diastolic number is the pressure when the heart is at rest. High blood pressure is a consistently elevated pressure of 140 systolic or higher and/or 90 diastolic or higher.

The great 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, often 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.

Get help fast if you feel any of these warning signs of heart attack:

- Uncomfortable heavy feeling, pressure, pain or squeezing in the center of your chest that lasts more than a few minutes.
- Pain that goes to your shoulders, neck or arms.
- Discomfort in your chest along with a light head, fainting, sweating, nausea or shortness of breath.

**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:

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

**STROKE** and **TIA** (stroke warning) happen when a blood vessel that feeds the brain gets clogged or bursts. Then that part of the brain can't work and neither can the part of the body it controls.

Major causes of stroke are:

- Uncontrolled high blood pressure
- Smoking
- Heart disease

Get help fast if you have any of these warning signs of stroke or TIA:

- Feel weak in an arm, hand or leg.
  - Can't feel one side of face or body.
  - Suddenly can't see out of one eye.
  - Hard to talk.
  - Can't understand what someone is saying.
  - Feel dizzy or lose balance.
  - Have a sudden, very bad headache.
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### How can I learn more?

- Talk to your doctor, nurse or health care professional. Or call your local American Heart Association at 1-800-242-8721.
  - If you have heart disease, members of your family also may be at higher risk. It's very important for them to make changes now to lower their risk.
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### Do you have questions or comments for your doctor?

Take a few minutes to write your own questions for the next time you see your doctor. For example:

How can I avoid heart disease? \_\_\_\_\_

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What about medicine? \_\_\_\_\_

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