



# Heart disease risk factors

## What is heart disease?

Heart disease is a general term used to describe conditions that affect the heart or blood vessels. There are many different forms of heart disease, however, coronary artery disease is the most common form of heart disease in the United States.

## What causes coronary artery disease?

Coronary artery disease is caused by atherosclerosis (hardening and narrowing of the arteries due to the buildup of plaque around the artery wall). When the arteries become narrow, it is more difficult for blood to flow through them. If a blood clot forms, it can block the flow of blood. If this happens in an artery that supplies the heart or brain, a heart attack or stroke can occur. It is not known exactly what causes atherosclerosis, but it may start when the inner lining of the artery becomes damaged. Smoking and having high cholesterol, triglyceride and blood pressure levels are believed to contribute to this damage.

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# Risk factors for heart disease

## Health conditions

- **High blood pressure:** This health condition, also known as hypertension, is a major risk factor for heart disease that occurs when the pressure of the blood in blood vessels is too high. If this pressure is not controlled, it can cause damage to the blood vessels and lead to heart disease.
- **Unhealthy blood cholesterol levels:** Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance made by the liver and found in certain foods. Your liver produces the amount your body needs to remain healthy, however, we often consume more from the foods that we eat. Extra cholesterol in the body can build up on the walls of the heart and arteries, leading to increased blood pressure and heart disease risk.
- **Diabetes mellitus:** Diabetes causes sugar to build up in the blood, which can cause damage to the blood vessels if not effectively managed. The risk of death from heart disease for adults with diabetes is higher than in adults not diagnosed with the condition.
- **Obesity:** Having excess body fat (obesity) is linked to higher “bad” cholesterol, or LDL cholesterol, which can build up on the blood vessel walls and form plaque that can block normal blood flow. Obesity is also linked to higher triglyceride levels, which may contribute to hardening of the arteries or thickening of the artery walls. Due to these effects, obesity can lead to high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease.

## Behaviors

- **Eating a diet high in saturated fats, trans fats, and cholesterol:** Eating a diet that is high in saturated fats, trans fats, and cholesterol has been linked to heart disease. Eating too much salt can also raise your blood pressure and put you at greater risk of heart disease.
- **Lack of physical activity:** An inactive lifestyle can lead to heart disease because it increases the chances of developing other medical conditions that are risk factors. These include obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes.
- **Excessive alcohol use:** Drinking too much alcohol can raise your blood pressure and the level of triglycerides in the blood, which both increase your risk of developing heart disease.
- **Tobacco use:** Smoking can damage the heart and blood vessels in the body. This increases the risk of developing certain heart conditions, including heart disease.

## Genetics and family history

Genetic factors can play a role in high blood pressure, heart disease, and other health conditions. It is likely that individuals from the family are exposed to similar environments and lifestyles that may increase their risk. The risk for heart disease can increase further when genetics and family history is combined with unhealthy behaviors.



## Age and Sex

Heart disease is often thought of as a man's disease, however, heart disease in women is just as common as heart disease in men. The risk for developing heart disease increases in all persons as they age.

# Symptoms of heart disease

Angina is a common symptom of coronary artery disease. It may feel like pain, pressure or a squeezing sensation in your chest, shoulders, arms, neck, jaw or back. Angina can feel like indigestion, and it tends to feel worse when you are physically active or under emotional stress. It often goes away with rest. Shortness of breath is another common symptom of the condition.

However, coronary artery disease does not always cause symptoms. In silent coronary heart disease, the first signs of heart disease are symptoms of a heart attack, heart failure or arrhythmia.

## Heart attack symptoms include:

- Pain, pressure, squeezing or fullness in the center of your chest (can be constant or come and go).
- Pain or discomfort in one or both arms, neck, jaw, back or stomach
- Shortness of breath
- Breaking out in a cold sweat
- Nausea
- Lightheadedness

The most common sign of a heart attack in both men and women is chest pain or discomfort. But heart disease symptoms in men and heart disease symptoms in women can differ. Women are more likely than men to experience other common symptoms, especially shortness of breath, nausea, vomiting and jaw or back pain during a heart attack.

If you think you are having a heart attack, you should seek emergency care right away. A heart attack is considered a medical emergency.

## Signs of heart failure include:

- Shortness of breath or trouble breathing
- Intense fatigue
- Swelling of the feet, ankles, legs, or abdomen

## Symptoms of arrhythmia can include:

- Palpitations or a fluttering feeling in the heart
- A feeling like your heart is skipping beats or beating too fast



## How to prevent heart disease

Heart disease prevention begins with leading a healthy lifestyle. Maintaining a healthy weight, getting regular exercise, eating a nutritious diet, limiting alcohol intake, and quitting smoking can help reduce your chance of heart problems. Easing stress and getting enough sleep can also lower your risk. If you have diabetes or high blood pressure, cholesterol, or triglycerides, follow your treatment plan as directed by your health care provider. Keeping these levels in check can help prevent heart disease.



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