

# What are Heart Disease and Stroke?

There are many types of heart and blood vessel diseases. Over 60 million Americans have one or more of them. Each year about 930,000 people die from them — nearly 40 percent of all deaths in the United States! Yet many types of heart disease and stroke can be prevented. Here are some key steps you can take:

- Don't smoke, and avoid other people's tobacco smoke.
- Lower your blood pressure if you need to.
- Eat a healthy diet low in saturated fat, cholesterol and salt.
- Be physically active.
- Keep your weight under control.
- Get regular medical check-ups.
- Follow your doctor's orders for taking medicine.
- Control your blood sugar if you have diabetes.

## What are some types of heart and blood vessel diseases?

**HARDENING OF THE ARTERIES**, or atherosclerosis (ath-er-o-skleh-RO-sis), is when the inner walls of arteries become narrower due to a buildup of plaque. This limits the flow of blood to the heart and brain. Sometimes, this plaque can break open. When this happens, a blood clot will form and block the artery. This can cause heart attacks and strokes.

**HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE**, also called hypertension (hi-per-TEN-shun), 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, systolic number is the pressure when the heart beats. The bottom, diastolic number 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.

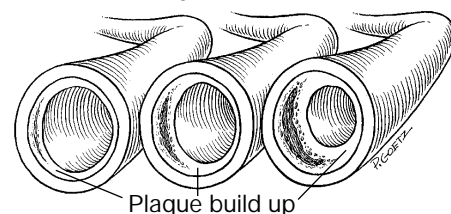
The great danger is that you usually can't tell you have high blood pressure! There are no signs, so you must see a doctor every year. Also, no one knows exactly what

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, 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 that can mean a heart attack is happening:

- 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.
- Pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach.



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 (ko-LES-ter-ol). This buildup is called plaque (plak). Plaque can split open and cause a blood clot to form. When the blood flow gets blocked, you could have a heart attack or stroke.

- 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, don't wait more than 5 minutes before calling 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:

- Swelling in feet, ankles and legs, called "edema" (eh-DEE-muh).
- Fluid builds up in lungs, called "pulmonary congestion" (PUL-mo-nair-ee kon-JEST-shun).

**STROKE** and **TIA** ("mini-stroke") 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 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:

- Suddenly feel weak in an arm, hand or leg.
- Suddenly feel numb on side of face or body.
- Suddenly can't see out of one eye.
- Suddenly have a hard time talking.
- Suddenly can't understand what someone is saying.
- Suddenly feel dizzy or lose balance.
- Suddenly have a very bad headache.

## How can I learn more?

1. Talk to your doctor, nurse or other health-care professionals. If you have heart disease or have had a stroke, members of your family also may be at higher risk. It's very important for them to make changes now to lower their risk.
2. Call 1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721), or visit [americanheart.org](http://americanheart.org) to learn more about heart disease.

3. For more information on stroke, call 1-888-4-STROKE (1-888-478-7653) or visit us online at [StrokeAssociation.org](http://StrokeAssociation.org).

We have many other fact sheets and educational booklets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk, manage disease or care for a loved one.

Knowledge is power, so *Learn and Live!*

## Do you have questions or comments for your doctor or nurse?

- Take a few minutes to write your own 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?