Heart Disease

What is heart disease?

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States. More than 600,000 Americans die of heart disease each year. That's one in every four deaths in this country.[1]

The term "heart disease" refers to several types of heart conditions. The most common type is coronary artery disease, which can cause heart attack. Other kinds of heart disease may involve the valves in the heart, or the heart may not pump well and cause heart failure. Some people are born with heart disease.

Are you at risk?

Anyone, including children, can develop heart disease. It occurs when a substance called plaque builds up in your arteries. When this happens, your arteries can narrow over time, reducing blood flow to the heart.

Smoking, eating an unhealthy diet, and not getting enough exercise all increase your risk for having heart disease.

Having high cholesterol, high blood pressure, or diabetes also can increase your risk for heart disease. Ask your doctor about preventing or treating these medical conditions.

What are the signs and symptoms?

The symptoms vary depending on the type of heart disease. For many people, chest discomfort or a heart attack is the first sign.

Someone having a heart attack may experience several symptoms, including:

- Chest pain or discomfort that doesn't go away after a few minutes.

- Pain or discomfort in the jaw, neck, or back.

- Weakness, light-headedness, nausea (feeling sick to your stomach), or a cold sweat.

- Pain or discomfort in the arms or shoulder.

- Shortness of breath.

If you think that you or someone you know is having a heart attack, call 9-1-1 immediately.

[1] CDC: Deaths: Final Data for 2009. *www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr60/nvsr60_03.pdf*

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How is heart disease diagnosed?

Your doctor can perform several tests to diagnose heart disease, including chest X-rays, coronary angiograms, electrocardiograms (ECG or EKG), and exercise stress tests. Ask your doctor about what tests may be right for you.

Can it be prevented?

You can take several steps to reduce your risk for heart disease:

- Don't smoke. CDC's Office on Smoking and Health Web site has information on quitting smoking.
  http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco

- Maintain a healthy weight. CDC's Healthy Weight Web site includes information and tools to help you lose weight.
  http://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/index.html

- Eat a healthy diet. Tips on reducing saturated fat in your diet are available on the Web site for CDC's Division for Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity.
  http://www.cdc.gov/nutrition/everyone/basics/fat/saturatedfat.html

- Exercise regularly. Visit CDC's Physical Activity Web site for more information on being active.
  http://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/index.html

- Prevent or treat your other health conditions, especially high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes.

How is it treated?

If you have heart disease, lifestyle changes, like those just listed, can help lower your risk for complications. Your doctor also may prescribe medication to treat the disease. Talk with your doctor about the best ways to reduce your heart disease risk.

For More Information:

Learn more at the following Web sites.

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Division for Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention:
  http://www.cdc.gov/dhdsp/index.htm

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center on Birth Defects & Developmental Disabilities:
  http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/default.htm

- American Heart Association:
  http://www.americanheart.org

- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute:
  http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov