

YOUR HEALTH & WELL BEING



Heart Disease: What Is It?

Coronary heart disease is a result of a blockage in the blood vessels that supply blood to the heart. The heart muscle requires a constant supply of oxygen and nutrients in order to function properly. When the coronary arteries become partially blocked, chest pain (angina) sometimes occurs. If there is a complete blockage in any of these arteries, part of the heart muscle receives no oxygen and dies. This is called a myocardial infarction or heart attack.

WHAT CAUSES HEART DISEASE?

Atherosclerosis (a gradual build-up of fat and cholesterol in the arteries) narrows the arteries and restricts the flow of blood. Further, scar tissue can form and debris can build up creating plaque. Blood clots can get trapped in the narrowing passage and block the blood flow, or over time the deposits themselves can completely block the passageway. When this happens in coronary arteries (those that feed the heart), it is called arteriosclerosis. This can cause angina or heart attacks. When a blockage due to atherosclerosis occurs in the blood vessels

feeding the brain, a stroke can result.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE HEART DISEASE?

Symptoms of heart disease usually don't show up until an artery is at least two-thirds blocked. If this happens in the major artery that leads to the vital organs in your abdomen, you may suffer abdominal pain as an organ is deprived of blood. When this happens to the heart muscle, a dull-to-crushing pain may occur in the chest area (usually beneath the breastbone). This often happens right after physical activity, and usually goes away after a few minutes (sometimes up to 20 minutes) of rest.

Symptoms of a heart attack are much more serious and require immediate medical attention. See your doctor or call an ambulance immediately if you have any of the following symptoms:

- A heavy squeezing or crushing pain in the center of the chest that lasts for several minutes
- Pain that radiates to the shoulder, back, jaw, arm or neck

- Sweating, anxiety, nausea or vomiting
- Shortness of breath, dizziness or fainting

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I THINK I'M HAVING ANGINA OR A HEART ATTACK?

In the case of severe chest pain or if you think you are having a heart attack:

- Take one aspirin immediately
- Call for emergency help (911)

IN THE CASE OF ANGINA:

Call for emergency help if the pain gets worse, radiates down your arm or to the jaw or neck, or is accompanied by shortness of breath, rapid irregular pulse, sweating, nausea or vomiting. If your chest pain doesn't go away after a few minutes rest and after taking any medication prescribed for angina attacks (e.g., nitroglycerin).

Knowing the signs and symptoms of heart disease can truly be life saving for you or a loved one. Learn to recognize the symptoms and seek a doctor's help if you think you may have heart disease.

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