

Know what's in your heart



What is heart disease?

Heart disease is a very broad term for many conditions that can affect your heart. Here, we're focusing on heart issues that can be prevented or controlled. When it's healthy, your heart is a marvel of strength and efficiency. It gives you stamina and helps you get through the day. To most people, the heart is also an emotional center — it beats faster with excitement and calms when you feel loved. The more you know about your heart, the better you can support it and the better it can support you.

Coronary artery disease

This form of heart disease happens gradually, which is why it's possible for you to prevent or minimize its impact on your life. Coronary artery disease results from the accumulation of plaque on the inner walls of the arteries that bring blood to and from the heart. As more plaque is deposited, the arteries narrow and stiffen, restricting the flow of blood. Over time, this can lead to a heart attack because the heart can't get sufficient blood to keep working. Heart attacks can also occur suddenly when plaque cracks (or ruptures), causing a blood clot to form and block off the coronary artery. In fact, most heart attacks are believed to result from a cracked plaque. Irrespective of how it occurs, a heart attack can cause permanent damage to the heart muscle.¹

Know your risks

Why do some people seem to get heart disease and others don't? No one knows for sure, but we do know that there are risk factors that can increase the likelihood that you'll develop heart disease.

Statistics say that older people are more likely to die of heart disease.^{2,3} However, even young adults are at risk and the steps you take to support your heart throughout your life can affect whether you have heart problems when you are older. But even if you're already over 65 and you have some bad habits, you can still make better choices now that will reduce your risks.

Try tackling one habit at a time. For example, if you smoke cigarettes and also eat an unhealthy diet, first work on reducing or even quitting smoking. Then, once you've become comfortable as a nonsmoker, begin to make improvements in your diet.

If you haven't made exercise a regular part of your day, start with short walks that don't feel too daunting. If you sit at your desk a lot, make sure you stand up every 30 to 60 minutes and walk around or stretch. You don't have to join a gym or run a marathon to make positive lifestyle changes.

The most important thing is to keep at it. Don't give up. Follow a realistic plan that will lessen your chances of developing heart disease. Enlist the support of family, friends and co-workers. They'd probably love to cheer you on in your efforts. And who knows? You may even inspire them to join you. Remember that hearts are capable of tremendous gratitude — if you are good to your heart, it will reward you for a long time to come.

Sources:

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Coronary Artery Disease (CAD), July 19, 2021. Available from www.cdc.
2. World Health Organization. Fact Sheet: Cardiovascular Diseases, June 11, 2021. Available from www.who.org.
3. American Heart Association. Heart Disease and Stroke Statistics – 2021 Update: A Report from the American Heart Association, *Circulation*. 2021;Feb 23;143(8):e254-e743.

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