



# What Is a Heart Attack?

---

Every 36 seconds, someone dies from heart and blood vessel diseases, America's No. 1 killer. Since most of those deaths are from coronary heart disease — about 452,000 each year — it's important to learn all you can about heart attack. Don't ignore heart problems. It's a matter of life and death!

For example, you should know the warning signs so you can get help right away, either for yourself or someone close to you. Acting quickly can save many, many lives!

Some heart attacks are sudden and intense. But most start slowly, with mild pain or discomfort. 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, your back, neck, jaw or stomach.
- Shortness of breath with or without chest discomfort.
- Other signs such as breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea or lightheadedness.

If you or someone you're with has chest discomfort, especially with one or more of the other signs, don't wait more than five minutes before calling for help. Call 9-1-1 or the emergency medical services (EMS) in your area (fire department or ambulance). Get to a hospital right away.

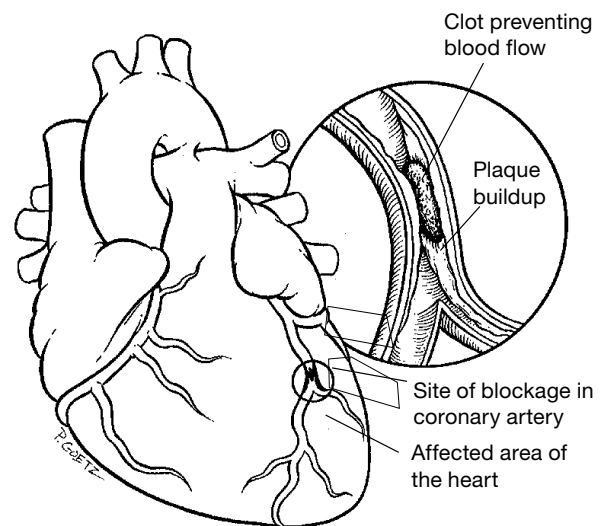
---

## What causes heart attack?

A coronary attack (heart attack) occurs when the blood flow to a part of the heart is blocked (often by a blood clot). This happens because coronary arteries that supply the heart with blood slowly become thicker and harder from a buildup of fat, cholesterol and other substances, called plaque.

If the plaque breaks open and a blood clot forms that blocks the blood flow, a heart attack occurs. Then the heart muscle supplied by that artery begins to die. Damage increases the longer an artery stays blocked.

Once that muscle dies, the result is permanent heart damage.



---

## How can I recover?

Depending on the extent of your heart attack, you may only be in the hospital a few days. But your recovery is just beginning.

- Start making changes in your life now to reduce your risk of having another heart attack. Eat healthful meals, be more physically active, and if you smoke, quit.

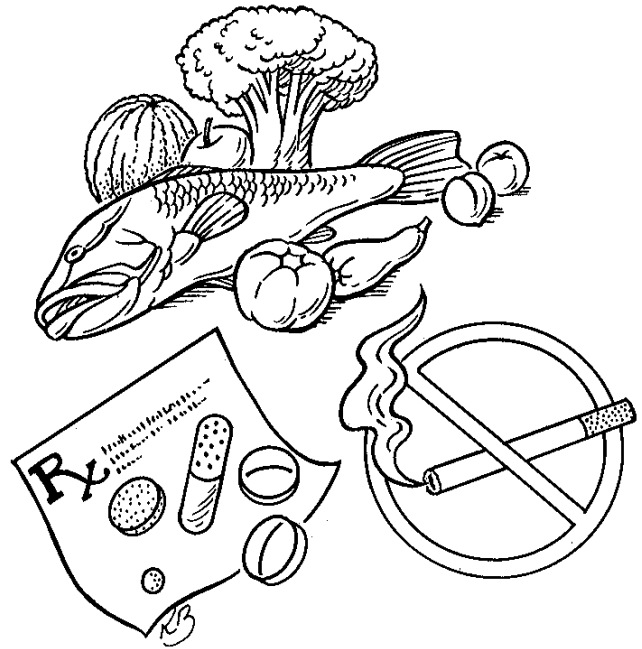
- Talk with your doctor and nurses about how you can live as normal a life as possible. Ask how soon you can go back to work, drive a car, have sex, and what to do if you have chest discomfort. They can answer your questions about other matters, too.
- Join a cardiac rehabilitation program in your area.

## How can I avoid a heart attack?

Even if you have heart disease, there's a lot you can do to improve your heart's health.

Ask your doctor or nurse for help. Together, you can set goals to reduce the things that raise your risk of heart attack.

- Don't smoke, and avoid other people's tobacco smoke.
- Treat high blood pressure, if you have it.
- Eat a healthy diet that's low in saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol and salt.
- Exercise at least 30 minutes on most or all days of the week.
- Keep your weight in the normal range.
- See your doctor for regular check-ups.
- Take your medicines exactly as prescribed.
- Control your blood sugar if you have diabetes.



You can help prevent a heart attack! You must control your blood pressure, stop smoking, eat a healthful diet, exercise and know the warning signs!

## 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 information on stroke, call 1-888-4-STROKE (1-888-478-7653) or visit [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?

Take a few minutes to write your own questions for the next time you see your healthcare provider. For example:

What about *desserts*? \_\_\_\_\_

What's a *good, healthful cookbook*? \_\_\_\_\_

Your contribution to the American Heart Association supports research that helps make publications like this possible.

The statistics in this sheet were up to date at publication. For the latest statistics, see the *Heart Disease and Stroke Statistics Update* at [americanheart.org/statistics](http://americanheart.org/statistics).

©2007, American Heart Association 10/07LS1466