

February is American Heart Month

Since 1963, the president has declared February “American Heart Month” in an effort to urge Americans to join the battle against heart diseases.

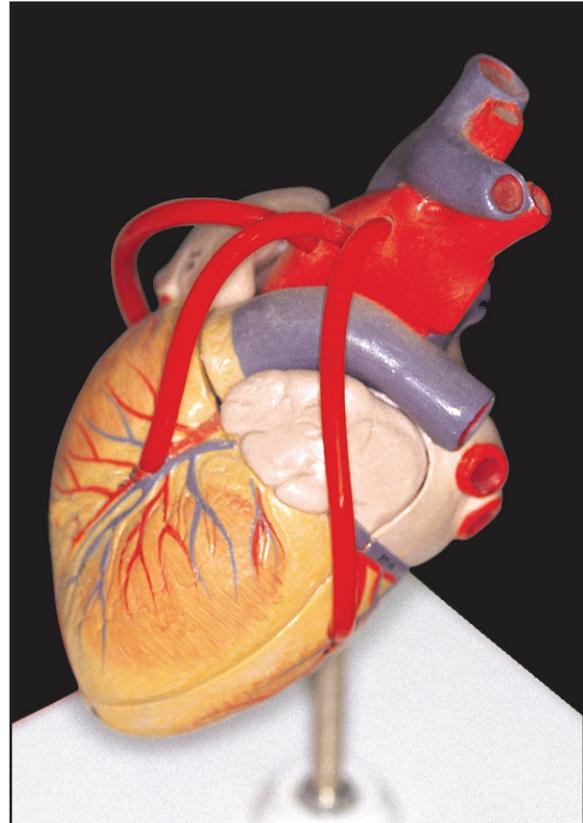
According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), heart disease is responsible for 40 percent of all deaths in the United States, more than all forms of cancer combined. The most common type of heart disease is coronary artery disease (CAD)—also called coronary heart disease—which is the main cause heart attack.

Risk Factors

CAD is the leading cause of death in the United States for both men and women. Certain risk factors can increase the chances of developing CAD. The DHHS, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and other experts report that some risk factors are beyond a person’s control, but most can be modified to help lower the risk of having a first—or repeat—heart attack.

CAD risk factors that cannot be controlled include:

- Preexisting coronary heart disease: including previous heart attack, prior angioplasty or bypass surgery, or angina (chest pain)
- Age: Risk increases for men after age 45; for women, after age 55
- Family history of early heart disease



CAD risk factors that can be controlled include:

- Smoking
- High blood pressure
- High blood cholesterol
- Overweight and obesity
- Physical inactivity
- Diabetes

Risk factors do not add their effects in a simple way. Rather, they multiply each other’s effects. So, it is very important to control those risk factors that can be modified.

Heart Attack Signs and Symptoms

Most heart attacks are not sudden and intense, like in the movies where a person clutches his or her chest and falls over. Instead, they start slowly, as mild pain or discomfort. Someone having a heart attack may experience several symptoms, including these identified by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and other experts:

- Chest discomfort: Pain or tightening in the center of the chest that does not go away after a few minutes
- Discomfort in the upper body: Pain in one or both arms, back, neck, jaw or stomach
- Shortness of breath: Often occurs along with or before chest discomfort
- Other symptoms: May include weakness, cold sweat, light-headedness and nausea

As with men, women's most common heart attack symptom is chest pain or discomfort. But women are somewhat more likely than men to experience some of the other common symptoms, particularly shortness of breath, nausea or vomiting, and back or jaw pain.

Response: Don't Delay

The NIH reports that each year, about 1.1 million Americans suffer a heart attack—and about 460,000 of them are fatal. About half those deaths occur within one hour of the start of symptoms and before the person reaches the hospital.

Most persons having a heart attack wait too long to seek medical help. People often take a wait-and-see approach, delaying because they do not understand the symptoms of a heart attack and think that what they are feeling is due to something else. Or they are afraid or unwilling to admit that their symptoms could be serious. Or they are embarrassed about “causing a scene” or a “false alarm.”

Remember, minutes matter. If you think that you or someone else is having a heart attack, do not delay. Call 9-1-1. The sooner a victim is treated by emergency medical personnel, the better the chances for survival and recovery are.

Lowering the Risk for CAD

CAD is a condition in which plaque builds up inside coronary arteries. Plaque narrows the arteries and reduces blood flow to the heart muscle. When blood flow to an area of the heart is completely blocked, a heart attack occurs.

All persons can lower their risk of heart disease and heart attack by incorporating these lifestyle habits:

- Don't smoke
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Eat a healthy diet

- Exercise regularly
- Prevent or treat other health conditions: high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes

For additional heart-health information, visit

www.cdc.gov/heartdisease

www.nhlbi.nih.gov/actintime/index.htm

www.americanheart.org

Remember, these strategies are not intended to provide medical advice or treatment. Check with your healthcare provider before taking part in behavior and lifestyle changes.

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