

CAUSES OF HEART ATTACKS



Globally, cardiovascular diseases are one of the main causes of death. But what is heart disease?

Heart disease, also called cardiovascular disease, is the number one killer of men and women across the world. Cardiovascular disease is a general term used to describe a range of disorders that affect the heart. These include:

- Narrowing of the blood vessels (a common form of heart disease)
- Other diseases of the blood vessels
- Heart rhythm problems
- Heart infections
- Congenital (present from birth) heart defects.

What is a heart attack?

A heart attack occurs when the blood flow to a part of the heart is blocked. This happens when coronary arteries (the blood vessels supplying blood to the heart muscle) slowly become thicker and harder from a build-up of fat, cholesterol and other substances, called plaque. If the plaque breaks open and a blood clot forms, it blocks the blood flow. This is when a heart attack occurs.

“Heart muscle dies without blood supply,” explains Dr Tony Dalby, a cardiologist based in Johannesburg. “The longer an artery stays blocked, the greater the damage to the heart muscle. Once the muscle dies, the result is permanent scarring. When the heart has a scar, it doesn’t function properly. This means there’s a risk of dying from heart failure or from a sudden cardiac arrest at some time in the future.”

Cardiac arrest is an electrical malfunction in the heart that causes an irregular heartbeat. When its pumping action is disrupted, the heart cannot pump blood to the brain, lungs and other organs. Seconds later, you lose consciousness and have no pulse. Death occurs within minutes if you do not receive treatment.

How would you know if you were having a heart attack?

Crushing chest pain? That’s what most people think they will feel if they are having a heart attack. But that’s not always the case. “A heart attack may not be the worst pain ever,” says Dr Dalby. “Some patients do develop severe pain, but more commonly the pain may seem bearable, so the heart attack could be misinterpreted as something else.”

Generally, symptoms include:

- An ache in the chest confused as indigestion or gas-like pain
- An uncomfortable feeling in the centre of the chest and going into the arm, neck or shoulder
- Pressure or pain in the centre of the chest which may spread to either arm
- Upper back, shoulder or throat pain
- Jaw pain or pain that spreads up to the jaw
- Breathlessness or fatigue
- A pain in the tummy or the neck or teeth
- Discomfort in the stomach
- Breaking out in a cold sweat
- Nausea and shortness of breath
- Unusual fatigue lasting for several days, or sudden, severe fatigue and light-headedness
- Sleep disturbances
- Anxiety

Are symptoms of a heart attack the same in men and women?

According to the Mayo Clinic, cardiovascular disease symptoms may be different for men and women. They say men are more likely to have chest pain while women are more likely to have other symptoms as well as chest discomfort, such as shortness of breath, nausea and extreme fatigue.

Leading risk factors for cardiovascular disease

Risk factors that can be controlled

- Smoking
- High cholesterol
- High blood pressure
- High blood sugar and diabetes
- Obesity
- Unhealthy diet; lack of exercise
- Emotional stress



Risk factors that cannot be controlled

- Age: men over 45 and women over 55 have a higher risk of cardiovascular disease
- Family history of early heart disease

Live to prevent ever having to deal with cardiovascular diseases

Studies show that up to 80% of premature deaths related to cardiovascular disease can be prevented by a healthy lifestyle.