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Heart Health Glossary

Learn the definitions of some common heart health terms that you may read about in NIA's heart health articles. More information about these terms and other heart health topics is available from the NIH National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute.

Español

Angina

Angina (an-JI-nuh or AN-jin-nuh) is chest pain or discomfort that occurs if an area of your heart muscle doesn't get enough oxygen-rich blood. It may feel like pressure or squeezing in your chest, shoulders, arms, neck, jaw, or back.

Aortic aneurysm

Aortic aneurysms (ay-OR-tick AN-ur-ih-zem) are balloon-like bulges that occur in the aorta, which is the main artery that carries blood from your heart to the rest of your body. An aneurysm that bursts or causes a tear in the wall of the artery can cause life-threatening bleeding inside the body.

Arrhythmia

An arrhythmia (ah-RITH-me-ah) is a problem with the rate or rhythm of the heartbeat. An arrhythmia can cause the heart to beat too fast, too slow, or in an irregular way.

Arteriosclerosis

Arteriosclerosis (ahr-TEER-ee-o-skluh-ROH-sis) develops when the arteries become thick, stiff, and less elastic as you get older. Arteries are the blood vessels that carry oxygen-rich blood to your heart and other parts of your body. These changes result in high blood pressure, which increases the risk of coronary heart disease, heart attack, heart failure, stroke, and diseases of the kidneys, brain, and eyes.

Atherosclerosis

Atherosclerosis (ATH-uh-roh-skluh-ROH-sis), which is a type of arteriosclerosis, describes the buildup of a sticky, fatty substance called plaque within the walls of arteries. This buildup causes the arteries to narrow, which reduces blood flow through the body. As a result, less oxygen-rich blood can reach vital organs and tissues.

Atrial fibrillation

Atrial fibrillation (AY-tree-uhl fib-rill-AY-shun), also known as A-fib or AF, is a condition in which the heart's upper and lower chambers do not work together as they should. This can cause your heartbeat to be too fast, too slow, or irregular.

Cardiovascular disease

Cardiovascular disease is the term for all types of disease that affect the heart or blood vessels, including coronary heart disease, which can cause heart attacks, stroke, heart failure, and peripheral artery disease.

Coronary heart disease

Coronary heart disease (CHD) (also known as coronary artery disease or heart disease) is a disease in which a waxy substance called plaque builds up inside the coronary arteries. The plaque can reduce the amount of oxygen-rich blood that can reach your heart or cause blood clots.

Defibrillators

Defibrillators (dee-FIB-ril-ay-tors) are devices that send an electric pulse or shock to the heart to restore a normal heartbeat. They can help prevent sudden death in people who have a life-threatening arrhythmia or experience cardiac arrest.

Electrocardiogram

An electrocardiogram (uh-LEK-trow-KAR-dee-uh-gram), also called an ECG or EKG, is a simple, painless test that detects and records your heart's electrical activity. This test helps to diagnose a heart attack or an arrhythmia.

Heart attack

A heart attack happens when the flow of blood to the heart suddenly becomes blocked and the heart can't get enough oxygen. If blood flow isn't restored quickly, the heart muscle begins to die. Heart attacks are a leading cause of death in both men and women.

Heart failure

Heart failure (also known as congestive heart failure) is a condition in which the heart can't pump enough blood to meet the body's needs. It develops over time as the pumping action of the heart gets weaker, or if it gets more difficult to adequately fill the heart with blood between heartbeats.

Heart valve diseases

Heart valve diseases are conditions affecting one or more of the four valves in the heart. These valves ensure that blood flows in the right direction through your heart and to the rest of your body. If one or more of your heart valves doesn't open or close correctly, it can affect blood flow and strain your heart. Most heart valve conditions are treatable.

High blood cholesterol

Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance the body needs for good health, but it needs to be present in the right amounts. Excess cholesterol can build up in your blood vessels, which can lead to heart attack, stroke, or other health problems.

High blood pressure

High blood pressure (also known as hypertension) is a common health problem in which blood flows through arteries at higher-than-normal pressures. If high blood pressure isn't controlled with lifestyle changes and/or medication, it can lead to serious health problems, including cardiovascular disease.

Low blood pressure

Low blood pressure (also known as hypotension) occurs when blood flows through arteries at lower-than-normal pressures. Some people have low blood pressure all the time, and it is normal for them. In other people, low blood pressure can cause problems such as dizziness, fainting, or in extreme cases, shock.

Pacemakers

A pacemaker is a small, implanted device that sends electrical pulses to help keep the heartbeat at a normal rate and rhythm. A pacemaker can help control abnormal heart rhythms.

Stroke

A stroke occurs if the flow of oxygen-rich blood to part of the brain is blocked by a blood clot or narrowing of a blood vessel. Without oxygen, brain cells start to die after a few minutes. Stroke can also result from sudden bleeding in the brain that damages brain cells.

Sudden cardiac arrest

Sudden cardiac arrest (SCA) (also known as cardiac arrest) is a condition in which the heart suddenly and unexpectedly stops beating. If this happens, blood stops flowing to the brain and other vital organs. If it is not treated, SCA usually causes death within minutes. But quick treatment with cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and/or an automated external defibrillator (AED) may be lifesaving.

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