What Is a Heart Attack?

Every 34 seconds, someone dies from heart and blood vessel diseases, America's No. 1 killer. Since most of those deaths are from coronary heart disease — over 375,000 each year — it's important to learn all you can about heart attack.

For example, you should know the warning signs of heart attack so you can get help right away, either for yourself or someone close to you.

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, **immediately 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 a heart attack?

A 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

Clot in coronary artery preventing blood flow

Plaque buildup
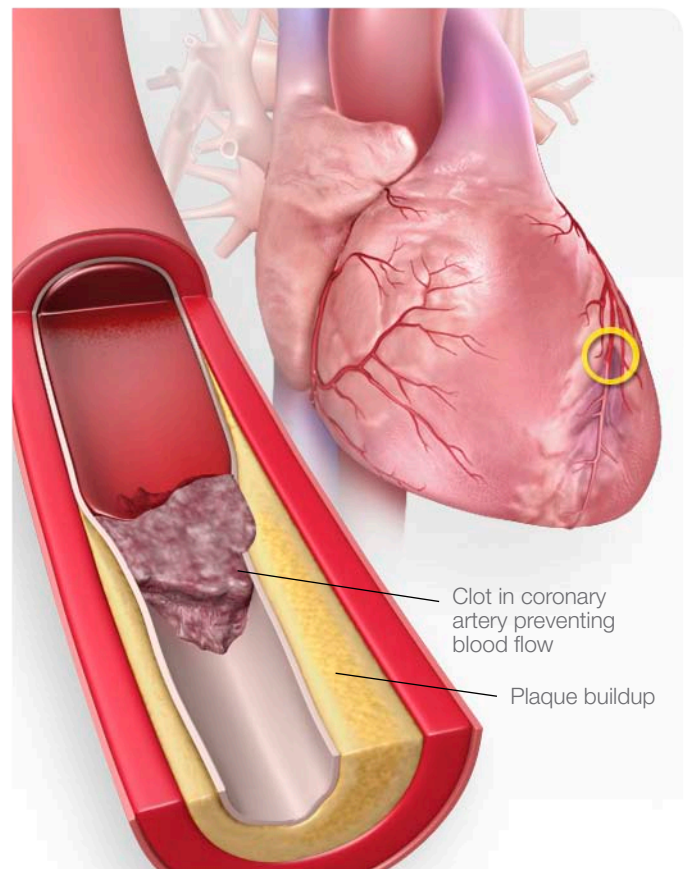
blocks the blood flow, a heart attack occurs. Then the heart muscle supplied by that artery begins to die. Damage increases the longer an artery stays blocked.

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 heart-healthy meals, be more physically active, reach and maintain a healthy weight, and don't smoke.

• 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.

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- Talk with your healthcare provider about joining a cardiac rehabilitation program in your area.

How can I reduce my risk for a heart attack?

Even if you have heart disease, there's a lot you can do to improve your heart's health. Work with your healthcare provider to set goals to reduce your risk of heart attack.

- Don't smoke, and avoid second-hand smoke.
- Treat high blood pressure, if you have it.
- Eat a healthy diet that's low in saturated fat, *trans* fat, and sodium (salt).
- Get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity a week.
- Reach and maintain a healthy weight.
- Control your blood sugar if you have diabetes.
- See your doctor for regular check-ups.
- Take your medicines exactly as prescribed.
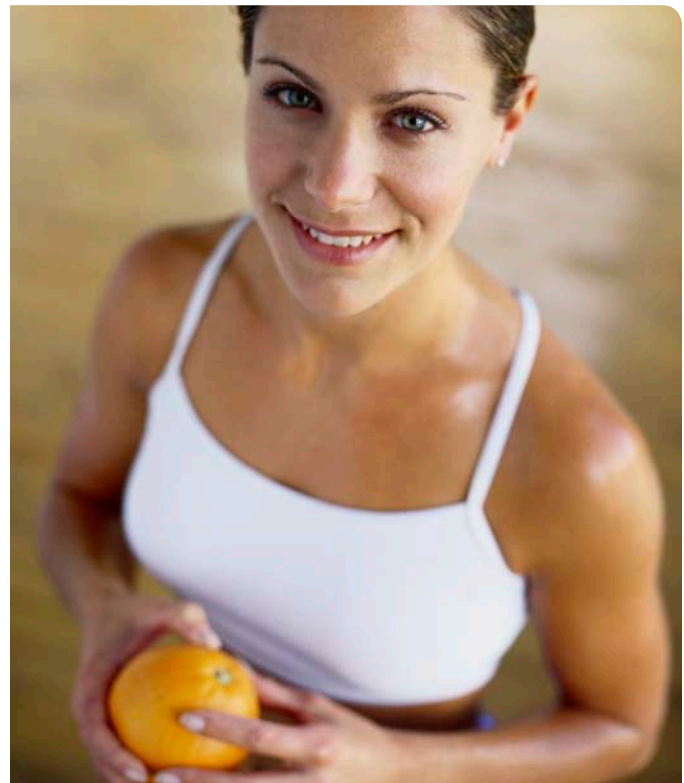
Getting exercise and improving your diet are among the many things you can do to avoid a heart attack.

HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

1. Call **1-800-AHA-USA1** (1-800-242-8721), or visit **heart.org** to learn more about heart disease and stroke.

2. Sign up to get *Heart Insight*, a free magazine for heart patients and their families, at **heartinsight.org**.

3. Connect with others sharing similar journeys with heart disease and stroke by join-ing our Support Network at **heart.org/supportnetwork**.

Do you have questions for the doctor or nurse?

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

For example:

How soon can I return to work after my heart attack?

Is there a cardiac rehab program in my area?

My Questions:

We have many other fact sheets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk, manage disease or care for a loved one. Visit **heart.org/answersbyheart** to learn more.

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