



# About Women and Heart Disease

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## KEY POINTS

- Heart disease is the leading cause of death for women in the United States and can affect women at any age.
- High blood pressure is a major risk factor for heart disease.



## Overview

Over 60 million women (44%) in the United States are living with some form of heart disease.<sup>[1]</sup> Heart disease is the leading cause of death for women in the United States and can affect women at any age.

In 2023, it was responsible for the deaths of 304,970 women—or about **1 in every 5** female deaths.<sup>[2]</sup> Only about half (56%) of US women recognize that heart disease is their number 1 killer.<sup>[3]</sup>

Knowing the facts about heart disease—as well as the signs, symptoms and risk factors—can help you take steps to protect your health and seek proper treatment if you need it.

## Types

**Coronary artery disease:** The most common heart disease is caused by plaque in the walls of the arteries that supply blood to your heart and other parts of your body. After menopause, women are at a higher risk of coronary artery disease because of hormonal changes.<sup>[4]</sup>

**Arrhythmia:** This condition is when your heart beats too slowly, too fast, or in an irregular way. A common example is [atrial fibrillation](#).

**Heart failure:** Heart failure is when your heart is too weak to pump enough blood to support other organs in your body. This condition is serious, but it doesn't mean your heart has stopped beating.

## Symptoms

Although some women have no symptoms,<sup>[4]</sup> others may have:

- Angina—usually felt as a dull or heavy chest discomfort or ache.
- Pain in the neck, jaw, or throat.
- Pain in the upper abdomen or back.

These symptoms may happen when you're resting or active. Women also may have other symptoms,<sup>[4]</sup> including:

- Nausea.
- Vomiting.
- Tiredness that won't go away or feels excessive.

## When to call 9-1-1

In some women, the first signs and symptoms of heart disease can be:

- **Heart attack:** Chest pain or discomfort, upper back or neck pain, indigestion, heartburn, nausea or vomiting, extreme fatigue, dizziness, and shortness of breath.
- Fluttering feelings in the chest (palpitations).
- Shortness of breath, sudden fatigue, or swelling of the feet, ankles, legs, or abdomen.

If you have any of these symptoms, don't delay. Call 9-1-1 right away.

## Risk factors

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**High blood pressure** is a major risk factor for heart disease. More than 58.9 million women in the United States (45.7%) have high blood pressure (defined as 130/80 mm Hg or higher) or are taking blood pressure medicine. [5] This includes almost 1 in 5 women of reproductive age. [6]

Having high blood pressure increases the risk of developing heart disease and stroke and can lead to early death. [6] [7] High blood pressure is often underdiagnosed in women, and fewer than 1 in 4 women with high blood pressure (22.8%) have their condition under control. [5]

Black women are nearly 60% more likely to have high blood pressure than White women. [8] **Pregnant women with high blood pressure** have twice the risk of developing heart disease later in life compared to pregnant women without this condition. [8] In the United States, high blood pressure develops in 1 in every 8 (13.0%) pregnancies. [9]

Several other medical conditions and lifestyle choices can put women at higher risk of heart disease, [4] including:

- High LDL (low-density lipoprotein) cholesterol
- Smoking
- Diabetes
- Excess weight
- An unhealthy diet
- Physical inactivity
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Stress and depression

Women also face specific factors related to reproductive health and pregnancy, [9] [10] [11] [12] [13] including:

- Early first period (before age 11)
- Early menopause (before age 40)
- Polycystic ovary syndrome
- Diabetes during pregnancy (gestational diabetes)
- Preterm delivery
- Delivery of a low birth weight or high birth weight infant
- Hypertensive disorders of pregnancy

Cardiovascular conditions during pregnancy can also increase a woman's risk of heart disease and pregnancy-related complications. Find out more about these conditions and what you can do to prevent them or reduce their long-term effects:

- **Peripartum Cardiomyopathy**

## Reducing risk

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Know your blood pressure. Having uncontrolled blood pressure can lead to heart disease, stroke, kidney failure, and dementia. High blood pressure has no symptoms. It's important to check your blood pressure regularly and report elevated readings to your health care team.

Talk to your doctor or health care team about whether you should be tested for diabetes. Having uncontrolled diabetes raises your risk of heart disease. [9]

Quit smoking. If you don't smoke, don't start. If you do smoke, learn ways to quit.

Talk to your doctor about checking your cholesterol and triglycerides.

Get at least 150 minutes of physical activity each week. Even short "doses" of activity are good for your heart.

Make [healthy food choices](#). Having overweight or obesity raises your risk of heart disease.

Limit how much alcohol you drink to one drink a day. If you're pregnant, don't drink any alcohol. There is no safe time for alcohol use during pregnancy.

Manage stress levels by finding healthy ways to cope with stress.

## What CDC is doing

- [Million Hearts®](#)
- [WISEWOMAN](#)
- [Million Hearts | Hypertensive Disorders of Pregnancy](#)

## Resources

- [Heart Disease](#) website, Office on Women's Health (OWH), US Department of Health and Human Services
- [Listen to Your Heart: Women and Heart Disease](#) website, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

### SOURCES

#### CONTENT SOURCE:

National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion; About the Division for Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention

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