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# Heart Disease in Women

## What is heart disease?

Heart disease [<https://medlineplus.gov/heartdiseases.html>] is a general term that includes many types of heart problems. It's also called cardiovascular disease, which means heart and blood vessel disease.

Coronary artery disease [<https://medlineplus.gov/coronaryarterydisease.html>] (also called coronary heart disease) is the most common type of heart disease in both men and women. It happens slowly over time when a sticky substance called **plaque** builds up in the arteries [<https://medlineplus.gov/atherosclerosis.html>] that supply your heart muscle with blood. The plaque narrows or blocks blood flow to the heart muscle and can lead to:

- Angina [<https://medlineplus.gov/angina.html>] - chest pain from lack of blood flow
- Heart attacks [<https://medlineplus.gov/heartattack.html>] - when part of the heart muscle dies from loss of blood flow
- Heart failure [<https://medlineplus.gov/heartfailure.html>] - when your heart can't pump enough blood to meet your body's needs
- Arrhythmia [<https://medlineplus.gov/arrhythmia.html>] - a problem with the rate or rhythm of your heartbeat

## How does heart disease affect women?

In the United States, heart disease is the number one cause of death in women. But women are often not diagnosed with heart disease as quickly as men are. That's because:

- Women are more likely than men to have "silent" heart disease, meaning that they don't have symptoms.
- Health care providers may not recognize heart disease in women because women's symptoms may be different from men's symptoms.
- Women are more likely than men to have certain types of heart disease that can be harder to diagnose.

A delay in diagnosis may mean a delay in medical care that could help prevent serious problems, such as a heart attack. That's why it's important to learn about your risk for heart disease, the symptoms in women, and how to keep your heart healthy.

## What types of heart disease do women get?

Women can get any type of heart disease. Like men, the most common type of heart disease among women is coronary artery disease. But there are certain types of heart disease which are less common, but affect women more often than men:

- **Coronary microvascular disease** - Chest pain from spasms (sudden tightening) in the smallest arteries of the heart that pinch off blood flow. It typically happens during rest or routine activities. This serious condition increases your risk of having a heart attack or other heart diseases. This type may be harder to diagnose since blockages in smaller arteries can be harder to see on imaging tests.
- **Broken heart syndrome** - Strong chest pain or other signs that look like a heart attack. It's caused by the **stress** [<https://medlineplus.gov/stress.html>] of powerful emotions, such as deep grief, anger, or surprise. It can happen even if you're healthy. It mostly affects women after menopause and usually doesn't cause any lasting damage.
- **Variant angina** - A rare type of strong chest pain from spasms in the heart arteries. The pain usually happens in a pattern during sleep. Variant angina rarely causes a heart attack.

## Which women are more likely to develop heart disease?

Your risk for developing heart disease increases with:

- **Menopause** [<https://medlineplus.gov/menopause.html>] . Women can develop heart disease at any age, but your risk increases after your periods stop, usually by age 55. Before menopause, your body makes more estrogen (a female hormone [<https://medlineplus.gov/hormones.html>] ) which helps protect against heart disease. That's why women generally develop coronary artery disease 10 years later than men. During and after menopause, estrogen levels drop and your risk for heart diseases goes up. If your periods stop before age 40, your risk will be higher than other women your age.
- **Family history of heart disease.** Your risk for heart disease may be higher if your:
  - Mother or sister had heart disease before age 65.
  - Father or brother had heart disease before age 55.
- **Problems during pregnancy**, such as high blood pressure [<https://medlineplus.gov/highbloodpressureinpregnancy.html>] , gestational diabetes [<https://medlineplus.gov/diabetesandpregnancy.html>] , anemia [<https://medlineplus.gov/anemia.html>] , and high blood pressure [<https://medlineplus.gov/highbloodpressureinpregnancy.html>] .
- **Use of hormonal** birth control [<https://medlineplus.gov/birthcontrol.html>] (pills, patches, or vaginal rings with estrogen and progesterone).
- Endometriosis [<https://medlineplus.gov/endometriosis.html>] .
- Polycystic ovary syndrome [<https://medlineplus.gov/polycysticovarysyndrome.html>] .
- Inflammatory and autoimmune diseases [<https://medlineplus.gov/autoimmunediseases.html>] .
- Metabolic syndrome [<https://medlineplus.gov/metabolicsyndrome.html>] .
- Mental health issues [<https://medlineplus.gov/mentalhealth.html>] , such as stress, anxiety [<https://medlineplus.gov/anxiety.html>] , or depression [<https://medlineplus.gov/depression.html>] .
- Health risks from a lack physical activity [<https://medlineplus.gov/healthrisksofaninactivelifestyle.html>] .
- Obesity [<https://medlineplus.gov/obesity.html>] or being overweight.
- Diabetes [<https://medlineplus.gov/diabetes.html>] .
- Low HDL cholesterol levels [<https://medlineplus.gov/hdlthegoodcholesterol.html>] .
- Mild to moderate high blood pressure [<https://medlineplus.gov/highbloodpressure.html>] .
- Smoking [<https://medlineplus.gov/smoking.html>] .

If you have one or more risks for heart disease, ask your health care provider for help understanding your risk level. Ask if you need any heart tests [<https://medlineplus.gov/hearthealthtests.html>] to help catch heart disease early.

## What are the symptoms of heart disease and heart attack in women?

When women have symptoms of **heart disease**, they may include:

- Pain or discomfort in the chest that may be dull and heavy or sharp
- Pain in the neck, jaw, throat, upper belly, or back
- Nausea or vomiting [<https://medlineplus.gov/nauseaandvomiting.html>]
- Unusual fatigue [<https://medlineplus.gov/fatigue.html>]
- Shortness of breath [<https://medlineplus.gov/breathingproblems.html>] (feeling like you can't get enough air) during physical activity

Women who have **coronary artery disease** are more likely than men to have chest pain when resting or doing daily activities, rather than during exercise. They're also more likely than men to feel chest pain from mental stress.

Symptoms of a **heart attack** in women may also be different than in men. Chest pain is the most common symptom for both sexes. It may feel like crushing or squeezing. But women are somewhat less likely than men to have chest pain.

During a **heart attack**, women may feel:

- Pressure or tightness in the chest
- Pain in the upper back, arms, neck, jaw or throat

- Dizziness [<https://medlineplus.gov/dizzinessandvertigo.html>]
- Unusual fatigue
- Indigestion [<https://medlineplus.gov/indigestion.html>] , heartburn [<https://medlineplus.gov/heartburn.html>] , nausea, or vomiting
- Stomach pain
- Shortness of breath

Heart attacks usually don't look like the sudden, dramatic events we see in the movies. The symptoms may be mild or strong. They may start slowly. They can stop and then come back.

## Can heart disease in women be prevented?



You can help lower your risk by:

- Learning how to prevent heart disease [<https://medlineplus.gov/howtopreventheartdisease.html>] and making heart-healthy habits part of your daily life.
- Asking your provider about your personal risk for heart disease and the best way to manage your heart health.

Remember, women can have heart disease without symptoms. But if you pay attention to your risk for heart disease, you can take action to prevent problems or keep them from getting worse.

*NIH: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute*


## Start Here

- Heart Disease [<https://womenshealth.gov/heart-disease-and-stroke/heart-disease>]  
(Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health)  
Also in Spanish [<https://espanol.womenshealth.gov/heart-disease-and-stroke/heart-disease>]
- Heart Health for Women [<https://www.fda.gov/consumers/womens-health-topics/heart-health-women>]  
**Easy-to-Read** (Food and Drug Administration)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.fda.gov/consumers/free-publications-women/salud-cardiaca-heart-health>]
- The Heart Truth [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health-topics/education-and-awareness/heart-truth>]  
 (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute)
- The Heart Truth for Women: Take Action to Protect Your Heart [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/resources/heart-truth-women-take-action-protect-your-heart-fact-sheet>]  (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute) - **PDF**

## Symptoms

- Heart Attack Symptoms in Women [<https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/heart-attack/warning-signs-of-a-heart-attack/heart-attack-symptoms-in-women>] (American Heart Association)


## Diagnosis and Tests

- Heart Health Tests: MedlinePlus Health Topic [<https://medlineplus.gov/hearthealthtests.html>]  (National Library of Medicine)  
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/hearthealthtests.html>]


## Prevention and Risk Factors

- Heart Disease and Stroke [<https://womenshealth.gov/heart-disease-and-stroke>]  
(Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health)
- Heart Disease in Women: Understand Symptoms and Risk Factors [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/heart-disease/in-depth/heart-disease/ART-20046167?p=1>] (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/es/diseases-conditions/heart-disease/in-depth/heart-disease/art-20046167?p=1>]
- Heart Disease Risk Factors [<https://womenshealth.gov/heart-disease-and-stroke/heart-disease/heart-disease-risk-factors>]  
(Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health)  
Also in Spanish [<https://espanol.womenshealth.gov/heart-disease-and-stroke/heart-disease/heart-disease-risk-factors>]

# Living With

- Calcium Supplements: A Risk Factor for Heart Attack? [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/heart-attack/expert-answers/calcium-supplements/FAQ-20058352?p=1>] (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/es/diseases-conditions/heart-attack/expert-answers/calcium-supplements/faq-20058352?p=1>]
- Healthy Recipes [<https://medlineplus.gov/recipes/>]  (National Library of Medicine)  
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/recetas/>]
- Heart Attack Recovery Questions and Answers [<https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/heart-attack/life-after-a-heart-attack/heart-attack-recovery-faqs>] (American Heart Association)
- Heart Healthy Eating [<https://womenshealth.gov/healthy-eating/how-eat-health/heart-healthy-eating>]  
(Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health)  
Also in Spanish [<https://espanol.womenshealth.gov/healthy-eating/how-eat-health/heart-healthy-eating>]
- What Is Heart-Healthy Living? [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/heart-healthy-living>]  
 (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/es/salud/vida-cardiosaludable>]

## Related Issues

- Heart Conditions and Pregnancy: Know the Risks [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/pregnancy-week-by-week/in-depth/pregnancy/art-20045977?p=1>] (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/es/healthy-lifestyle/pregnancy-week-by-week/in-depth/pregnancy/art-20045977?p=1>]
- Heart Disease in Hispanic Women [<https://www.goredforwomen.org/en/about-heart-disease-in-women/facts/heart-disease-in-hispanic-women>] (American Heart Association)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.goredforwomen.org/es/about-heart-disease-in-women/facts/heart-disease-in-hispanic-women>]
- Menopause and Cardiovascular Risk [<https://www.goredforwomen.org/en/know-your-risk/menopause/menopause-and-cardiovascular-risk>] (American Heart Association)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.goredforwomen.org/es/know-your-risk/menopause/menopause-and-cardiovascular-risk>]
- Pregnancy and Your Heart Health [[https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/THT-HBP-WomenPregnancyFactSheet\\_508.pdf](https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/THT-HBP-WomenPregnancyFactSheet_508.pdf)]  (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute) - PDF  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/es/resources/el-embarazo-y-la-salud-del-corazon-pregnancy-and-your-heart-health>]
- Women and Congenital Heart Defects [<https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/congenital-heart-defects/the-impact-of-congenital-heart-defects/chds-impact-on-females>] (American Heart Association)


## Specifics

- Coronary Artery Dissection: Not Just a Heart Attack [<https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/heart-attack/about-heart-attacks/coronary-artery-dissection-not-just-a-heart-attack>] (American Heart Association)
- Heart Attack and Women [<https://womenshealth.gov/heart-disease-and-stroke/heart-disease/heart-attack-and-women>]  
(Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health)  
Also in Spanish [<https://espanol.womenshealth.gov/heart-disease-and-stroke/heart-disease/heart-attack-and-women>]

## Statistics and Research

- About Women and Heart Disease [<https://www.cdc.gov/heart-disease/about/women-and-heart-disease.html>]  
(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

## Clinical Trials


- ClinicalTrials.gov: Heart Disease in Women [<https://clinicaltrials.gov/search?term=%22heart+diseases%22+AND+women&aggFilters=status:not%20rec>]  (National Institutes of Health)

## Journal Articles


## References and abstracts from MEDLINE/PubMed (National Library of Medicine)

- Article: The risk of heart-specific death in breast cancer patients. [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40753272>]
- Article: A multi-biomarker approach to risk stratification and detection of early cardiac... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40743121>]
- Article: Work limitations, business maintenance, and demoralization in self-employed individuals with cardiac... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40731285>]
- Heart Disease in Women -- see more articles [<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=%22Heart+Diseases%22%5Bmajr%3Anoexp%5D+AND+female+%5Bmh%5D+AND+humans%5Bmh%5D+AND+english%5Bla%5D+AND+%22last+1+Year%22+%5Bedat%5D+NOT+%28letter%5Bpt%5D+OR+case+reports%5Bpt%5D+OR+editorial%5Bpt%5D+OR+comment%5Bpt%5D%29+AND+free+full+text%5Bsb%5D+>]





## Reference Desk

- How the Heart Works [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/heart>]  (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute)  
Also in Spanish [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/es/salud/corazon>]

## Find an Expert

- American Heart Association [<https://www.heart.org/en/>]
- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/>] 

## Patient Handouts

- Heart disease and women [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/007188.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)  
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/007188.htm>]
- Take Action for Your Heart: Get Started! [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/resources/take-action-your-heart-get-started-fact-sheet>]  **Easy-to-Read** (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute) - **PDF**
- The Heart Truth for African American Women: Take Action to Protect Your Heart [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/resources/heart-truth-african-american-women-take-action-protect-your-heart-fact-sheet>]  (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute) - **PDF**
- The Heart Truth for Latinas: Take Action to Protect Your Heart [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/resources/heart-truth-latinas-take-action-protect-your-heart-fact-sheet>]  (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute) - **PDF**
- The Truth About African American Women and Heart Disease [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/resources/truth-about-african-american-women-and-heart-disease-fact-sheet>]  (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute) - **PDF**



## MEDICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA

Heart disease and women [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/007188.htm>]

Related Health Topics

- Angioplasty [<https://medlineplus.gov/angioplasty.html>]
- Arrhythmia [<https://medlineplus.gov/arrhythmia.html>]
- Congenital Heart Defects [<https://medlineplus.gov/congenitalheartdefects.html>]
- Coronary Artery Bypass Surgery [<https://medlineplus.gov/coronaryarterybypasssurgery.html>]
- Heart Failure [<https://medlineplus.gov/heartfailure.html>]
- Heart Health Tests [<https://medlineplus.gov/hearthealthtests.html>]
- Heart Valve Diseases [<https://medlineplus.gov/heartvalvediseases.html>]

National Institutes of Health

The primary NIH organization for research on *Heart Disease in Women* is the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute [<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/>]

Other Languages

Find health information in languages other than English [<https://medlineplus.gov/languages/heartdiseaseinwomen.html>] on *Heart Disease in Women*

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