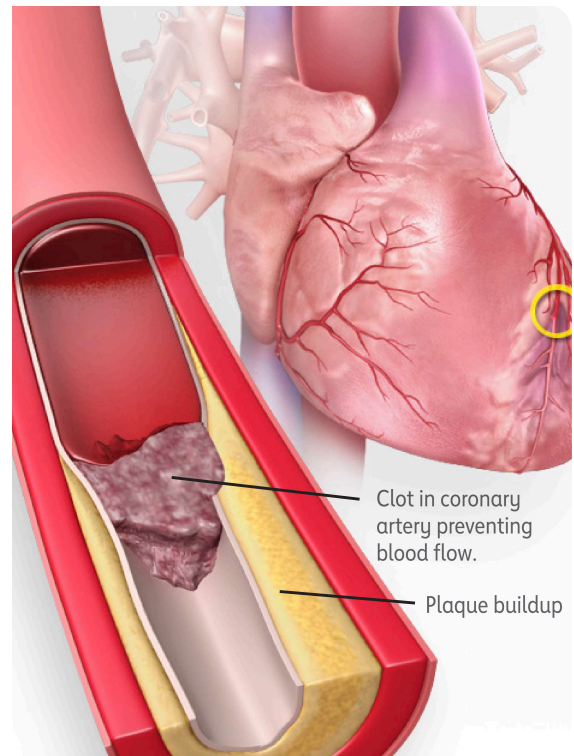


What is a Heart Attack?

A heart attack most commonly results from **atherosclerosis** (fatty buildups) in the arteries that carry blood to the heart muscle. Plaque buildup narrows the inside of the arteries, making it harder for blood to flow.

If a plaque in a heart artery ruptures (breaks open), a blood clot forms. The clot further blocks the blood flow. When it completely stops blood flow to part of the heart muscle, a heart attack occurs. Then the section of the heart muscle supplied by that artery begins to die. Damage increases the longer an artery stays blocked. In some cases, it may even die. Once that muscle dies, the result is permanent heart damage.

The amount of damage to the heart muscle depends on the size of the area supplied by the blocked artery and the time between injury and treatment. The blocked artery should be opened as soon as possible to reduce heart damage.



What are the warning signs?

Atherosclerosis develops over time, it often has no symptoms until there's enough damage to lessen the blood flow to your heart muscle.

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.

What happens after a heart attack?

Depending on the extent of your heart attack and the treatment you receive, you may only be in the hospital a few days. When you return home, your heart muscle will continue to heal. But your recovery is just beginning.

Follow your health care provider's recommendations about your weight, diet, physical activity, medicine and other lifestyle changes. That way, you'll have a better chance of improving your health and avoiding future attacks.

If you are eligible, your health care provider will recommend a cardiac rehabilitation program in your area. Cardiac rehab is a medically supervised program designed to improve your cardiovascular health. It has three equally important parts:

- Exercise counseling and training
- Education for heart-healthy living
- Counseling to reduce stress

If you or someone you're with has chest discomfort, especially with one or more of the other signs, **immediately call 911** or the emergency response number (fire department or ambulance) in your area. Get to a hospital right away.

(continued)



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 health.

Work with your health care provider to set goals to reduce your risk.

- Don't smoke, and avoid second-hand smoke.
- Treat high blood pressure, if you have it.
- Eat a heart-healthy diet that's low in saturated and trans fats, sodium (salt) and added sugars.
- 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.



Improving your diet is one of the 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](https://www.heart.org) to learn more about heart disease and stroke.
- 2 Sign up to get **Heart Insight**, a free monthly e-newsletter for heart patients and their families, at [heartinsight.org](https://www.heartinsight.org).
- 3 Connect with others sharing similar journeys with heart disease and stroke by joining our Support Network at [heart.org/supportnetwork](https://www.heart.org/supportnetwork).

Do you have questions for your doctor or nurse?

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

For example:

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

Is there a cardiac rehabilitation 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](https://www.heart.org/answersbyheart) to learn more.