

### What Is a Heart Attack?

A heart attack happens when the flow of oxygen-rich blood to a section of heart muscle suddenly becomes blocked and the heart can't get oxygen. If blood flow isn't restored quickly, the section of heart muscle begins to die.

Heart attacks are a leading killer of both men and women. The good news is that excellent treatments are available for heart attacks. These treatments can save lives and prevent disabilities.

Heart attack treatment works best when it's given right after symptoms occur.

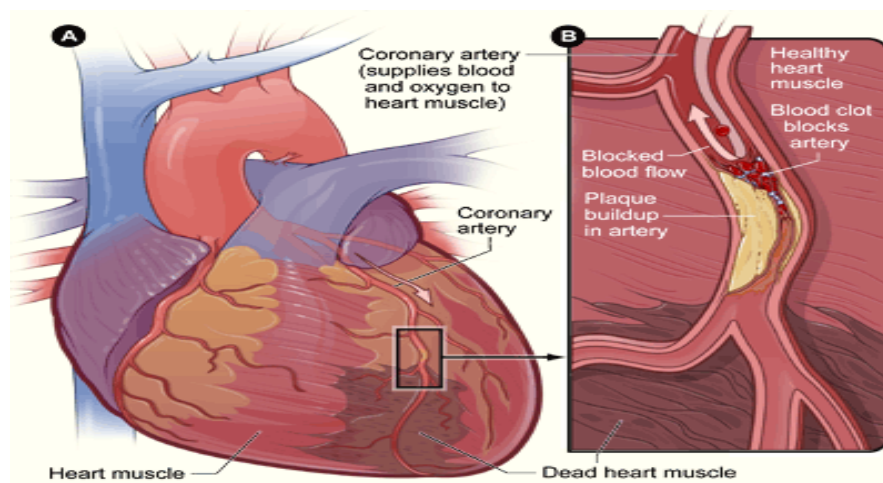
### Overview

Heart attacks most often occur as a result of coronary artery disease. CHD is a condition in which a waxy substance called plaque builds up inside the coronary arteries. These arteries supply oxygen-rich blood to your heart.

When plaque builds up in the arteries, the condition is called **atherosclerosis**. The buildup of plaque occurs over many years.

Eventually, an area of plaque can rupture (break open) inside of an artery. This causes a blood clot to form on the plaque's surface. If the clot becomes large enough, it can mostly or completely block blood flow through a coronary artery.

If the blockage isn't treated quickly, the portion of heart muscle fed by the artery begins to die. Healthy heart tissue is replaced with scar tissue. This heart damage may not be obvious, or it may cause severe or long-lasting problems.



***Heart With Muscle Damage and a Blocked Artery***

Figure A shows a heart with dead heart muscle caused by a heart attack. Figure B is a cross-section of a coronary artery with plaque buildup and a blood clot.

A less common cause of heart attack is a severe spasm (tightening) of a coronary artery. The spasm cuts off blood flow through the artery. Spasms can occur in coronary arteries that aren't affected by atherosclerosis.

Heart attacks can be associated with or lead to severe health problems, such as failure and life-threatening irregular heartbeats.

Heart failure is a condition in which the heart can't pump enough blood to meet the body's needs. Arrhythmias are irregular heartbeats. Ventricular fibrillation is a life-threatening arrhythmia that can cause death if not treated right away.

### ***Don't Wait--Get Help Quickly***

Many people aren't sure what's wrong when they are having symptoms of a heart attack. Some of the most common warning symptoms of a heart attack for both men and women are:

**Chest pain or discomfort.** Most heart attacks involve discomfort in the center or left side of the chest. The discomfort usually lasts more than a few minutes or goes away and comes back. It can feel like pressure, squeezing, fullness, or pain. It also can feel like heartburn or indigestion.

**Upper body discomfort.** You may feel pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, shoulders, neck, jaw, or upper part of the stomach (above the belly button).

**Shortness of breath.** This may be your only symptom, or it may occur before or along with chest pain or discomfort. It can occur when you are resting or doing a little bit of physical activity.

### **Other possible symptoms of a heart attack include:**

Breaking out in a cold sweat

Feeling unusually tired for no reason, sometimes for days (especially if you are a woman)

Nausea (feeling sick to the stomach) and vomiting

Light-headedness or sudden dizziness

Any sudden, new symptom or a change in the pattern of symptoms you already have (for example, if your symptoms become stronger or last longer than usual)

The symptoms of a heart attack can vary from person to person. Some people can have few symptoms and are surprised to learn they've had a heart attack. If you've already had a heart attack, your symptoms may not be the same for another one.

**By**

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