

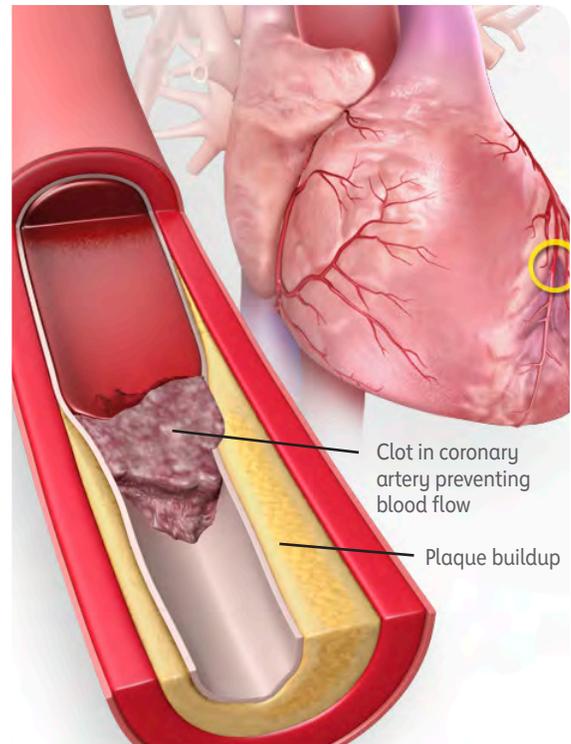


## What Is a Heart Attack?

A heart attack occurs when the blood flow that brings oxygen-rich blood to the heart muscle is severely reduced or cut off. This is due to a buildup of fat, cholesterol and other substances (plaque) that narrows coronary arteries. This process is called **atherosclerosis**.

When plaque in a heart artery breaks open, a blood clot forms. The clot can block blood flow. When it completely stops blood flow to part of the heart muscle, that portion of muscle begins to die. Damage increases the longer an artery stays blocked. Once some of the heart muscle dies, permanent heart damage results.

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 symptoms?

Atherosclerosis develops over time. It often has no symptoms until enough damage lessens blood flow to your heart muscle. That means you usually can't feel it happening until blood flow to the heart muscle is blocked.

You should know the symptoms of a heart attack so you can get help right away for yourself or someone else.

Some heart attacks are sudden and intense. But most start slowly, with mild pain or discomfort. The symptoms of a heart attack include:

- 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 pain or discomfort.
- Other symptoms 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 be in the hospital for only a few days. When you return home, your heart muscle will continue to heal. But your recovery is just beginning.

Follow your health care professional's recommendations about your medications, weight, diet, physical activity and other lifestyle changes. That way, you'll have a better chance to improve your health and avoid future attacks.

If you're eligible, your health care professional will refer you to a cardiac rehabilitation program in your area. Cardiac rehab, a medically supervised program to improve your heart health, has three 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 symptoms, **call 911 right away** so an ambulance can be sent. Don't delay — get help right away.

(continued)



### How can I reduce my risk for a heart attack?

Even if you have heart disease, you can do a lot to improve your heart health. Work with your health care team to reduce your risk. Some steps you can take include:

- Don't smoke or vape. Avoid secondhand smoke.
- Treat your high blood pressure, if you have it, according to your health care professional's recommendations.
- Eat a heart-healthy diet that's low in saturated and trans fats, sodium (salt) and added sugars.
- Move more during your day. 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.
- Get an average seven to nine hours of sleep a night.
- Manage your stress.
- See your health care professional for regular checkups.
- Take your medication(s) as prescribed.



Improving your diet is one of the many things you can do to improve your heart health.

### 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 for our monthly *Heart Insight* e-news 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 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 for heart disease, manage your condition or care for a loved one. Visit [heart.org/AnswersByHeart](https://www.heart.org/AnswersByHeart) to learn more.