

What is Heart Disease?

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Heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women (and for most racial and ethnic groups) in America, according to the CDC. About 20% of all deaths in the U.S. in 2020 were caused by heart disease – that’s someone every 34 seconds.

Despite its prevalence, many people don’t really know what heart disease is. It’s in everyone’s best interest to find out, especially because understanding the causes of heart disease can go a long way to helping you prevent it.

What is Heart Disease?

The term heart disease is a catch-all term for several different conditions that impair heart function, including:

- **Coronary Artery Disease.** “High blood pressure and narrowing of the coronary arteries are probably the most common causes of heart dysfunction that we see,” said Tom Richardson, cardiologist at Western Washington Medical Group. Narrowing of the arteries is called atherosclerosis, or coronary artery disease (CAD). “Atherosclerosis occurs when plaque builds up in arteries, and like high blood pressure, it makes the heart work harder with each beat to push the blood. That causes the heart muscle to thicken and decreases efficiency, which can cause a heart attack.”
- **Cardiomyopathy.** “As a result of a heart attack, you can have impairment of the pumping function of the heart,” explains Richardson. When the heart muscle has a hard time pumping blood to the rest of the body due to thickening or scar tissue, this is called cardiomyopathy.
- **Heart Valve Dysfunction.** Heart disease can also refer to dysfunction in the heart valves. When valves don’t keep blood flowing in the right direction, this restricts blood flow throughout the body.
- **Birth Defect.** Finally, congenital heart disease refers to structural defects in the heart that are present at the time of birth.

It is not uncommon for heart disease patients to have more than one of these conditions.

Causes of Heart Disease

Heart disease can occur at any age. While it is more common in men and women over 50 years old, lifestyle factors such as obesity and high blood pressure are putting younger people at higher risk for developing it earlier in life.

The leading risk factors for heart disease include:

- high blood pressure
- unhealthy blood cholesterol levels (high LDL), and
- smoking

Nearly half of all adults in America have at least one of these primary risk factors.

Additional risk factors include:

- diabetes
- obesity
- sedentary lifestyle
- alcohol consumption
- lack of sleep
- age and
- family history

Heart disease is largely preventable through healthy lifestyle choices. With a plant-based diet, regular exercise, and stress management, nonsmokers can maintain heart health.

Heart Disease Symptoms

Heart disease can progress undetected for many years. Patients may develop arrhythmia, or heart palpitations, that will alert them to a problem that needs attention.

But in many cases, heart attack or heart failure are the first signs that something is wrong. Blood tests and heart health tests can help detect heart disease before it becomes serious. Anyone who is at elevated risk should talk to their primary care provider about whether these tests are warranted.

Primary care providers can also help identify strategies and specific lifestyle changes that will help reduce the risk of developing heart disease.

Treatment for Heart Disease

Once a patient develops heart disease, their condition can be treated with medications such as blood thinners, statins, or beta blockers.

Severe cases of atherosclerosis may require surgery. Angioplasty widens the blocked part of an artery to improve blood flow; coronary artery bypass surgery replaces a blocked piece of artery with a healthy piece taken from elsewhere in the body.

Regardless of surgery or medication, all heart disease patients must make lifestyle changes to improve heart health– including smoking cessation, minimal alcohol consumption, adopting a plant-based diet, getting regular exercise, and managing stress. These lifestyle changes are the same actions that a person can take to prevent heart disease.

For heart disease patients, making these lifestyle changes may require more effort than simply taking a pill, but the good news is that you *can* control your heart disease to maintain a positive quality of life.

When to Seek Help from a Medical Provider

If you have one or more of the risk factors associated with heart disease and are concerned, visit your WWMG Primary Care provider. They can help advise on lifestyle modifications, medication, or refer you to a specialist such as a Cardiologist.

If you've already been diagnosed with heart disease, or are at high risk, contact WWMG Cardiology for a thorough assessment. Our experienced and caring Cardiology team will work with you to create an individualized treatment plan to help you stay healthy for many years to come.

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