In the time it takes you to read this story, your heart is pumping about five quarts of blood through more than 60,000 miles of arteries, veins, and capillaries—that’s farther than two trips or more than twice the distance around the world.

Depending upon how long you live, your heart could beat three billion times in your lifetime!

Your fist is about the size of your heart. In fact, it’s not heart-shaped at all. It’s more like a cone and weighs about 11 ounces. The heart is a muscle sandwiched between two thin protective layers. Inside are four chambers, two on the right and two on the left. Blood from all parts of the body, which is low in oxygen, returns to the right side of the heart to be pumped through the lungs where oxygen is replenished. Then, once again, it is pumped all around the body by the left side of the heart.

Quite simply, your heart’s purpose in life is life support. No heart beat, no life. If that wasn’t a good enough reason to learn about and take care of your heart, we don’t know what is!

Exploding Coronary Disease?

Do you know what heart disease is? How heart disease affects your heart? How hardening of the arteries is caused by cholesterol buildup? Exactly what is meant by hardening of the arteries? How to recognize the symptoms and signs of coronary heart disease? Are these questions running through your mind right now? If they aren’t, you need to know what heart disease is, how it affects your heart, and how to recognize the symptoms and signs that hardening of the arteries is causing malfunction of your heart.

What is Coronary Heart Disease?

To many people, the term disease means a “bug” you caught or an ailment you developed. Generally, doctors use disease to indicate the presence of a condition that impairs part of your body’s function. Therefore, if you or someone you know has heart disease, his or her heart does not function properly.

Heart of the Matter

Now let’s shift our focus to coronary heart disease. But first, in order to understand what is meant by this term, you must know about blood vessels and what they do.

All parts of the body require a constant supply of blood to provide them with oxygen and nutrients in order to do their job. The heart is no exception. Blood travels around the body in blood vessels, which are nothing more than tubes. A blood vessel that takes blood to a part of the body is known as an artery. A blood vessel that takes blood away from a part of the body is known as a vein.

The heart receives its blood through blood vessels known as coronary arteries. Without a supply of blood rich in oxygen and nutrients, the heart cannot do its job—that is, pumping blood throughout the body. Therefore, if your coronary arteries become seriously narrowed or blocked due to a build-up of cholesterol in their walls, blood flow to your heart will be limited, and your heart will not work properly. You will be suffering coronary heart disease because the blockage in your coronary arteries is causing malfunction of your heart.

Hardening of the Arteries

You have probably heard about hardening of the arteries. This condition is none other than a build-up of cholesterol in the walls of the arteries. When it seriously affects someone’s coronary arteries, that person suffers coronary heart disease because his or her heart will malfunction.

Cholesterol may be building up right now in your coronary arteries if you eat poorly and have a family history of coronary heart disease. However, the good news is that you can do something about it. Please refer to the “Count on Your Heart” section of this brochure to pick up some helpful tips.

For More Information

American Heart Association
www.heart.org

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute
www.nhlbi.nih.gov

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Count Your Risk Factors

A "risk factor" increases the likelihood of having coronary heart disease—things like angina pectoris (chest pain) or a heart attack. The more risk factors you have, the more likely you are to suffer coronary heart disease. When it comes to heart disease, here’s what puts you at greater risk:

- Advanced age
- Male gender
- Family history of heart attacks at a young age
- High blood pressure
- Smoking
- High low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (too much bad cholesterol)
- Low high-density lipoprotein cholesterol (not enough good cholesterol)
- A sedentary lifestyle (not enough exercise)
- Diabetes
- Heart enlargement
- The established presence of coronary heart disease

Rising Numbers, Rising Risk

As the following three numbers rise, so does your risk for developing heart disease. Know your numbers and work toward reaching or maintaining the ideal to help prevent heart disease.

1. **Blood Pressure:** The ideal blood pressure is below 120/80 mmHg.

2. **Cholesterol:** A total blood cholesterol level less than 200 mg/dl is desirable and reduces your risk of heart disease.

3. **Waist Size:** If you carry extra weight in your belly, you’re at greater risk for developing heart disease. Women should have a waist circumference of no more than 35 inches, while men need to stay below 40 inches.

You can measure your waist at any time—so grab a tape measure right now. An accurate blood pressure and cholesterol reading needs to be administered by a healthcare professional—have these numbers checked at your annual check-up (or visit your doctor now if you think you’re at risk).

Preventing Heart Disease: Q & A

Further, though increasing age is a risk factor for both men and women, in women, there is about 10 years’ delay in the appearance of coronary heart disease. Symptoms are different for women so heart attacks are underdiagnosed.

**Q** Does estrogen lower the risk of coronary heart disease in women?

**A** According to the Mayo Clinic, long-term hormone replacement therapy used to be routinely prescribed for postmenopausal women to relieve hot flashes and other menopause symptoms. Hormone replacement therapy was also thought to reduce the risk of heart disease.

Before menopause, women have a lower risk of heart disease than men do. But as women age, and their estrogen levels decline after menopause, their risk of heart disease increases. In the 1980s and 1990s, experts advised older women to take estrogen and other hormones to keep their hearts healthy.

However, hormone replacement therapy—or hormone therapy, as it’s now called—has had mixed results. Many of the hoped-for benefits failed to materialize for large numbers of women. The largest randomized, controlled trial to date actually found an insignificant increase in heart disease in postmenopausal women using hormone therapy.

Still, some data suggest that estrogen may decrease the risk of heart disease when taken early in postmenopausal years.

Hormone therapy risks may vary depending on whether estrogen is given alone or with a progestin, your current age and age at menopause, dose and type of estrogen, and other health risks such as your family medical history and cancer risks.

If you’ve already had a heart attack, hormone therapy is not for you. If you already have heart disease or you have a history of blood clots, the risks of hormone therapy have been clearly shown to outweigh any potential benefits.

What’s the bottom line? If you have questions about this issue it’s time to have a frank talk with your doctor.

**Q** I read that taking aspirin every day helps my heart. Is this true?

**A** Some research shows that people who take aspirin regularly after a heart attack reduce their heart and blood vessel problems by 25%. So, if you have been diagnosed as having coronary heart disease or if you have multiple risk factors for coronary heart disease, ask your doctor if taking one aspirin a day is right for you.

**Q** I’ve been told that because I’m a woman, I’m protected from having heart attacks. Is that true?

**A** In general, women vastly underestimate their relative risk of heart disease. They worry more about breast cancer, even though coronary heart disease is the major cause of death in women over the age of 25. It has been thought for many years that being a woman protected one from coronary heart disease. However, it is now known that a woman’s chance of dying from a heart attack and in association with coronary artery bypass surgery is 50% higher than in men.

Take Action

Although you have no control over some risk factors like age, gender, and family history, you certainly can control major lifestyle risk factors like physical inactivity and smoking.

Protecting your heart is literally in your hands. Through healthy lifestyle habits, you can lower your risk of developing heart disease. Here are the key heart healthy habits to live by:

- Limit your intake of both saturated and trans fats, which are commonly found in red meats and processed foods.
- Quit smoking.
- Exercise regularly—aim for 30 minutes of activity like a brisk walk on all or most days of the week. Remember always start slowly and check with your physician if you have questions.
- Eat a variety of fruits and vegetables—try to fill half of your plate with fruits and veggies.
- Consume whole grain foods like whole wheat bread and pasta.
- Know your numbers—have your blood pressure checked regularly, get your blood pressure checked at least every two years, and know your waist measurements. If you’re above normal ranges work with your doctor to get to an optimal level.
- Maintain a healthy weight—use scales like the Body Mass Index (BMI) or talk to your doctor at your annual health exam to determine if you need to lose weight.

Think you’re at risk for heart disease?

Talk to a healthcare professional to discuss your risks and specific treatment and prevention strategies.