

1. What is Heart Disease?

- **Heart disease** refers to a range of conditions that affect the heart, including **coronary artery disease (CAD), heart attack, heart failure, arrhythmias, and valvular heart disease.**
- **Coronary artery disease (CAD)** is the most common form of heart disease, where the arteries supplying blood to the heart muscle become narrowed or blocked, leading to reduced blood flow and oxygen to the heart.

2. Risk Factors for Heart Disease

The CDC lists several factors that increase the risk of developing heart disease, some of which are modifiable and some that are not:

- **Unmodifiable Risk Factors:**
 - **Age:** The risk increases with age, especially after 45 for men and 55 for women.
 - **Family history:** A family history of heart disease can increase your risk.
 - **Gender:** Men are generally at higher risk at a younger age, but the risk for women increases and may surpass men after menopause.
- **Modifiable Risk Factors:**
 - **High blood pressure (Hypertension):** High blood pressure can damage the heart and arteries over time, increasing the risk of heart disease.
 - **High cholesterol levels:** Excess cholesterol can build up in the arteries, leading to blockages.
 - **Smoking:** Tobacco use harms the blood vessels and increases the risk of heart disease.
 - **Physical inactivity:** Lack of exercise is a significant risk factor for heart disease.
 - **Obesity:** Being overweight or obese can contribute to high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes, all of which increase heart disease risk.
 - **Uncontrolled diabetes:** Diabetes increases the risk of heart disease due to high blood sugar levels that damage blood vessels and nerves.

- **Excessive alcohol consumption:** Drinking too much alcohol can raise blood pressure and add extra calories, leading to weight gain.
- **Poor diet:** Diets high in saturated fats, trans fats, sodium, and added sugars can increase the risk of heart disease.

3. Healthy Lifestyle Choices to Prevent Heart Disease

- **Maintain a healthy weight:** Achieving and maintaining a healthy weight helps control blood pressure, cholesterol, and diabetes, reducing heart disease risk.
- **Get regular physical activity:** Aim for at least **150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity** (e.g., brisk walking, cycling) or **75 minutes of vigorous activity** (e.g., running) each week, plus muscle-strengthening exercises.
- **Follow a heart-healthy diet:**
 - Focus on eating **fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins** (like fish, skinless poultry, and legumes).
 - **Limit saturated fats** (found in red meat, full-fat dairy, and processed foods) and **trans fats** (found in baked goods and some fried foods).
 - Reduce **sodium** by limiting processed foods, canned soups, and salty snacks.
 - Choose healthy fats like those from **olive oil, nuts, and avocados**.
 - **Limit sugary foods** and drinks, as excessive sugar intake can contribute to weight gain and diabetes.
- **Quit smoking:** Quitting smoking can reduce the risk of heart disease by improving circulation and reducing blood pressure.
- **Limit alcohol consumption:** If you drink, do so in moderation—no more than **one drink per day** for women and **two drinks per day** for men.

4. Monitoring and Managing Blood Pressure and Cholesterol

- **Check blood pressure regularly:** High blood pressure often has no symptoms but can damage the heart and arteries. Adults should check their blood pressure regularly, especially if they have a family history or other risk factors.
- **Monitor cholesterol levels:** Blood tests can measure your **total cholesterol, LDL (bad cholesterol), HDL (good cholesterol), and triglycerides**. Keeping cholesterol levels in a healthy range is essential for heart health.

- **Manage diabetes:** Keeping blood sugar levels within a target range helps prevent complications, including heart disease.

5. Recognizing the Symptoms of a Heart Attack

A heart attack occurs when the blood flow to part of the heart is blocked. Common signs include:

- Chest pain or discomfort (pressure, tightness, or squeezing sensation)
- Pain or discomfort in the arms, back, neck, jaw, or stomach
- Shortness of breath
- Cold sweat
- Nausea or lightheadedness
- Pain that may come and go or last for more than a few minutes

If you experience these symptoms, call **911 immediately**.

6. Managing Heart Disease

- For those diagnosed with heart disease, treatment may include medications, lifestyle changes, or procedures such as **angioplasty, stents**, or even surgery (e.g., bypass surgery).
- Medications may include **aspirin, beta-blockers, statins** (for lowering cholesterol), and **ACE inhibitors** (to help control blood pressure).

7. Preventing Stroke

- Heart disease increases the risk of **stroke**, especially if you have conditions like high blood pressure or atrial fibrillation (an irregular heart rhythm).
- **Aspirin** or other blood thinners may be prescribed to reduce the risk of stroke, especially in people with heart disease.

8. Regular Health Check-ups

- Regular check-ups with a healthcare provider help monitor heart health and manage risk factors like blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar levels.
- Screenings for heart disease may include an **electrocardiogram (ECG)**, **stress test**, or **echocardiogram** to assess heart function.

9. Mental Health and Heart Disease

- Stress, depression, and anxiety can contribute to heart disease risk. Managing stress through relaxation techniques (e.g., meditation, deep breathing, or yoga) and seeking support for mental health concerns is important.
- Social support from family, friends, or support groups can also help people cope with the emotional aspects of heart disease.

Key Takeaways:

The CDC emphasizes that **preventing heart disease** is largely within an individual's control through healthy lifestyle choices. For those already diagnosed with heart disease, effective management involves a combination of lifestyle changes, medication adherence, and regular medical visits to reduce symptoms and prevent complications.