

# What is a Heart Attack?

The heart. Its steady rhythm marks the beat of life.

It is 'aflutter' in love and excitement, strong and steady in moments of calm. But if you suffer a heart attack, this pumping force can be damaged and even stop.

The heart is a muscle that pumps oxygen-rich blood throughout the body. In a healthy heart, blood vessels called coronary arteries supply the heart with the oxygen-rich blood it needs to function.

The insides of healthy coronary arteries are smooth and elastic, letting blood flow through them freely.

In some people, the coronary arteries become damaged. There are many factors that can cause this damage.

These factors are called risk factors. Some can be controlled, while others, like your family history, cannot be controlled.

Some common controllable risk factors include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, smoking, diabetes, physical inactivity, being overweight and obesity.

Each of these can cause damage to your coronary arteries. If you have more than one risk factor, it can raise your risk of a heart attack even higher.

Damage to your coronary arteries can result in the build-up of plaque on the inside of the artery wall.

Plaque is a mix of fat, cholesterol, and other substances that forms on the artery wall.

As the plaque builds up, the arteries become narrowed and harden. Your heart has to work harder to pump blood through your body.

Most plaque is hard on the outside and soft on the inside.

If the plaque's outer layer ruptures or tears, smaller arteries farther from the rupture can quickly become blocked.

Another problem could be a blood clot may develop at the plaque rupture site and completely block the artery.

When a coronary artery is partly or completely blocked, less blood can get through the artery to the heart muscle.

Without oxygen, the heart tissue becomes damaged and starts to die. This is called a Myocardial Infarction, or heart attack.

Quick treatment to open the flow of blood back to the heart is very important. It will help limit the damage your heart receives and can save your life.

If you think you are having a heart attack, call 911. Get the help you need quickly to reduce the damage to your heart and save your life.