

Atherosclerosis

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I'd like to talk to you about the most common condition affecting the heart and blood vessels, it's called atherosclerosis or hardening of the arteries. I'm Dr. Clyde Yancy, a national spokesperson for the American Heart Association and professor of medicine at UT Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. Atherosclerosis is a chronic process caused by risk factors that damage the inner lining of the arteries. Some of these risk factors you can change and some you can't. Modifiable risk factors for atherosclerosis are high blood cholesterol, tobacco smoke, high blood pressure, lack of exercise, obesity, and diabetes. Two risk factors you can't change are your age and history of atherosclerosis in your family.

Atherosclerosis in the arteries that carry blood to the heart is called coronary artery disease. Blockages in the coronary arteries reduce blood flow to the heart muscle which may cause chest discomfort known as angina. If the blood flow is totally cut off, a heart attack may occur.

The symptoms of a heart attack are discomfort, pressure, fullness, squeezing or pain in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes or goes away and comes back, pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw, or stomach, shortness of breath with or without chest discomfort, breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea or lightheadedness. If you have these symptoms and they last more than five minutes, call 9-1-1. Getting treatment quickly is very important. It may turn out that you aren't having a heart attack, but better to be safe than sorry. An emergency room visit will allow doctors and nurses to do tests to find out if your symptoms are due to coronary artery disease.

Take atherosclerosis seriously. Make lifestyle changes to reduce your risk factors and take medicine if it's prescribed. Taking these steps can benefit arteries throughout the body. For example, when people stop smoking, increase their exercise, and lower their blood cholesterol by changing their diet and taking medications, their arteries actually begin to heal.