

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. Many things can cause this damage.

These things are called risk factors. You can control some of them, while others, like your age, ethnicity, and family history, you can't control.

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

Each of these can cause damage to your coronary arteries. If you have more than one risk factor, your risk of a heart attack is 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 narrow and harden. Your heart must then work harder to pump blood throughout your body.

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

If the plaque's outer layer ruptures or tears, a blood clot can form. This clot can travel down smaller arteries and cause a blockage there, or completely block the artery at the plaque rupture site.

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

Without oxygen, the heart tissue becomes damaged and starts to die.

You may have pain in the chest, jaw, or arm; shortness of breath; and heavy sweating.

This is called a Myocardial Infarction, or heart attack.

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

If you think you are having a heart attack, call 911. Get the help you need quickly. It can save your life.