

What is heart disease?

Heart disease often occurs or develops when a fatty substance called plaque builds up on the walls inside the arteries of your heart.

- These arteries are important because they supply oxygen-rich blood to your heart.
- Plaque buildup is called atherosclerosis (ATH-er-o-skler-O-sis), or hardening of the arteries. It occurs over many years.
- When plaque builds up, the arteries get narrower, which makes it harder for blood to flow through them.

Other names your healthcare provider may call heart disease are: coronary heart disease (CHD), coronary artery disease (CAD), or cardiovascular disease (CVD).

What causes heart disease?

Heart disease may begin with damage to the lining and inside layers of your heart's arteries. This damage to your arteries may be caused by:

- **Smoking.** This also includes secondhand smoke.
- **High cholesterol and other fats.** Too much "bad" cholesterol, called LDL, can build up plaque that can block your arteries. Cholesterol is a kind of waxy, fatty substance in the body.
- **High blood pressure.** High blood pressure puts too much pressure on the walls of your arteries.
- **High blood sugar.** Too much sugar in the blood caused by insulin resistance or diabetes.
- **Inflamed blood vessels**

Why is heart disease dangerous?

Heart disease can lead to:

- **Angina** — Angina is chest pain, squeezing, or pressure in your chest. It can also occur in the shoulders, arm, neck, jaw, or back. This can happen when arteries get too narrow for enough blood to flow to your heart.
- **Heart attack** — A heart attack can happen when blood flow to your heart muscle suddenly gets blocked. If blood does not start flowing to your heart again quickly, that section of heart muscle starts to die.
- **Heart failure** — With heart failure, your heart cannot pump enough blood for your body's needs.

Bring a list of questions you'd like to ask about heart disease to your next healthcare provider visit.

Questions I'd like to ask my provider about heart disease

