



Understanding heart disease

Your heart is an incredible machine. Every day, it beats about 100,000 times to pump blood through your body—that's about 2½ billion times in 70 years! Humans cannot live without the oxygen our blood provides, so it's incredibly important to have a healthy heart.

However, sometimes our lifestyle choices and/or medical issues we're born with can cause damage to the heart, resulting in heart disease. This is also known as cardiovascular (KAR-dee-oh-VAS-kyoo-ler) disease. The damage can happen to the heart muscle itself, the blood vessels that run through it, the valves that direct the flow of blood through the heart, or the electrical system that keeps the heart beating in a healthy rhythm.

The risks of heart disease

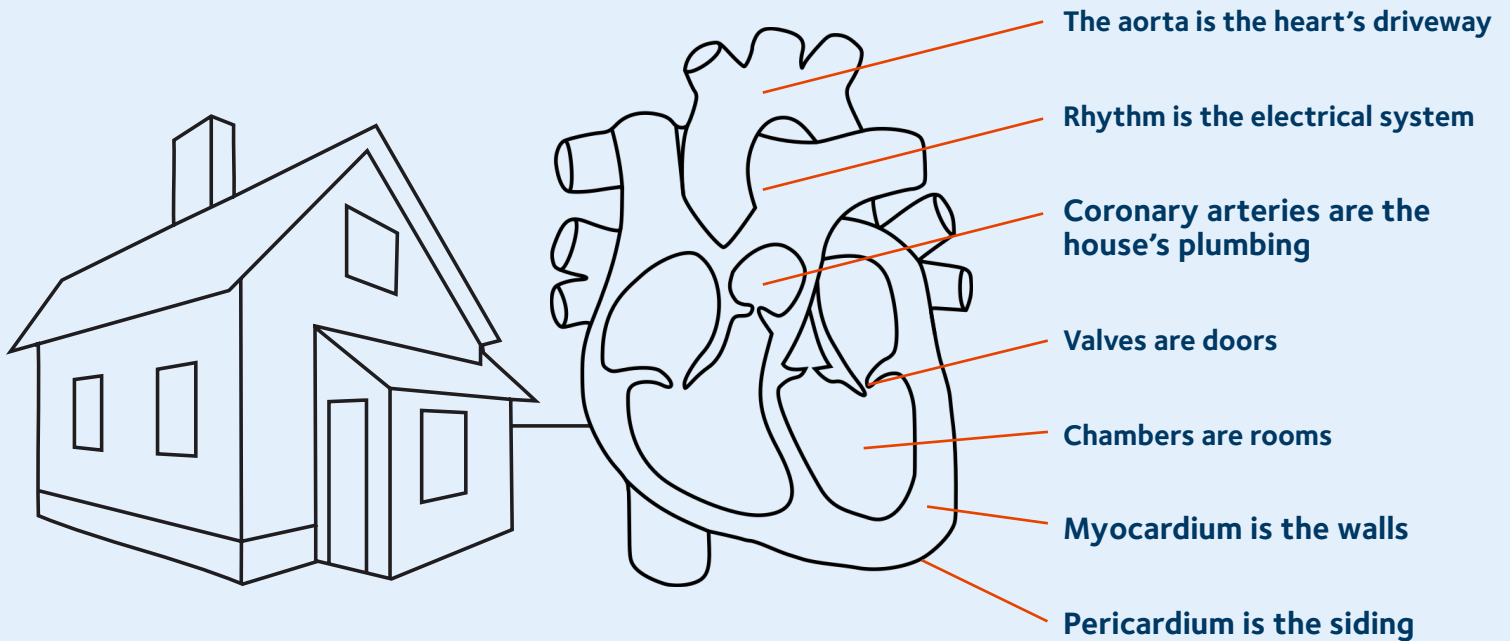
Heart disease can cause many different types of health problems or emergencies. In fact, it is the number-one killer of both men and women in the United States. For that reason, it is important to be aware of the medical issues heart disease can lead to. The examples below cover some of the most common results of heart disease.

Arrhythmia. Pronounced uh-RITH-mee-uh, this health issue has to do with the rhythm of the heart. When the heart is in arrhythmia, it may beat too fast, too slow or irregularly. It may feel like a skipped beat or a flutter in the chest—or it may not create any symptom at all. Not all arrhythmias are medical emergencies, but severe arrhythmias can lead to cardiac arrest, heart attack and other life-threatening situations.

Cardiac arrest. During cardiac arrest, the heart actually stops beating. In this situation, the person is at risk for dying very soon. A severe heart attack can cause cardiac arrest; in fact, this is how people die during a heart attack. However, not every heart attack involves cardiac arrest. In addition to heart attack, other things—such as a severe problem with the rhythm of the heart (arrhythmia) or an electrical shock—can cause cardiac arrest.

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Think of your heart as a house



Heart attack. A heart attack is also known as a myocardial infarction (pronounced my-oh-CAR-dee-uhl in-FARK-shun). It occurs when blood cannot get to certain areas of the heart, usually because a clot is stopping the flow of blood to that area. Without blood, the muscle in the affected area does not receive the oxygen it needs; it will eventually die, unless blood flow is restored. The heart continues to beat during a heart attack—unless it goes into cardiac arrest.

STEMI. This is a particular type of heart attack known as an ST-elevation myocardial infarction. The name comes from the way this type of heart attack looks on an EKG, a machine that provides an image of a person's heartbeat. STEMI is an especially life-threatening type of heart attack because it involves one of the major arteries that supplies oxygen to the heart.

Heart failure. When the heart muscle loses its ability to pump the way it should, a person may experience heart failure—also known as congestive heart failure or CHF. This does not mean the heart stops pumping altogether; it just means it is not pumping efficiently enough to supply the body with the oxygen it needs.

Keep your heart healthy

Even if you haven't experienced an emergency with your heart, you shouldn't forget about it! Visit your doctor on a regular basis so he or she can listen to your heart and do any other tests that may be necessary to make sure your heart is as healthy as it can be. When heart muscle dies, it never grows back—so it's very important to make sure you're doing everything you can to prevent heart disease.

If you're experiencing the signs of a heart attack, call 911 immediately!

Do not call your doctor, the hospital, or a friend or family member.