



Heart Attack: Risk Factors

- ⇒ **Age.** Men who are 45 or older and women who are 55 or older are more likely to have a heart attack than younger men and women.

- ⇒ **Tobacco.** Smoking and long-term exposure to secondhand smoke damage the interior walls of arteries — including arteries to your heart — allowing deposits of cholesterol and other substances to collect and slow blood flow. Smoking also increases the risk of deadly blood clots forming and causing a heart attack.

- ⇒ **Diabetes.** Diabetes is the inability of your body to adequately produce or respond to insulin properly. Insulin, a hormone secreted by your pancreas, allows your body to use glucose, which is a form of sugar from foods. Diabetes can occur in childhood, but it appears more often in middle age and among overweight people. Diabetes greatly increases your risk of a heart attack.

- ⇒ **High blood pressure.** Over time, high blood pressure can damage arteries that feed your heart by accelerating atherosclerosis. The risk of high blood pressure increases as you age, but the main culprits for most people are eating a diet too high in salt and being overweight. High blood pressure can also be an inherited problem.

- ⇒ **High blood cholesterol or triglyceride levels.** Cholesterol is a major part of the deposits that can narrow arteries throughout your body, including those that supply your heart. A high level of the wrong kind of cholesterol in your blood increases your risk of a heart attack. Low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol (the "bad" cholesterol) is most likely to narrow arteries. A high LDL level is undesirable and is often a result of a diet high in

saturated fats and cholesterol. A high level of triglycerides, a type of blood fat related to your diet, also is undesirable. However, a high level of high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol (the "good" cholesterol), which helps the body clean up excess cholesterol, is desirable and lowers your risk of heart attack.

- ⇒ **Family history of heart attack.** If your siblings, parents or grandparents have had heart attacks, you may be at risk, too. Your family may have a genetic condition that raises unwanted blood cholesterol levels. High blood pressure also can run in families.
- ⇒ **Lack of physical activity.** An inactive lifestyle contributes to high blood cholesterol levels and obesity. People who get regular aerobic exercise have better cardiovascular fitness, which decreases their overall risk of heart attack. Exercise is also beneficial in lowering high blood pressure.
- ⇒ **Obesity.** Obese people have a high proportion of body fat (a body mass index of 30 or higher). Obesity raises the risk of heart disease because it's associated with high blood cholesterol levels, high blood pressure and diabetes.
- ⇒ **Stress.** You may respond to stress in ways that can increase your risk of a heart attack. If you're under stress, you may overeat or smoke from nervous tension. Too much stress, as well as anger, can also raise your blood pressure.