

# Cardiovascular health

## What is cardiovascular disease?

Cardiovascular disease is the general term used to include diseases of the heart (cardio) and of the blood vessels (veins and arteries). Most cardiovascular diseases involve the heart and the brain. Conditions such as deep vein thrombosis (DVT) involve veins in other parts of the body, such as the legs.

Cardiovascular disease tends to develop over time, but here are some important facts:

- Heart disease is the leading cause of death in women in Australia
- Women are four times more likely to die from heart disease than breast cancer.

## Types of cardiovascular disease

### Aneurysm

A widening or bulge in an artery or vein that can burst.

### Angina

Discomfort or chest pain caused by lack of blood flow and oxygen to the heart muscle.

### Atherosclerosis

This is the gradual build-up of fatty deposits (plaque) on the inner walls of the arteries. It causes arteries to narrow, resulting in reduced blood flow to the heart and other organs. It can cause angina, heart attack and stroke.

### Coronary heart disease

When atherosclerosis affects the arteries of the heart, it is called coronary heart disease.

### Deep vein thrombosis (DVT)

Occurs when a clot forms in a vein situated deep in the body.

### Heart attack

Occurs when an artery to the heart becomes completely blocked and blood flow is stopped to part of the heart muscle.

### Know the symptoms of heart attack in women

Women can feel pain in the centre of the chest when having a heart attack, but not always. Rather than the chest pain men often feel, women may experience breathlessness, nausea, back pain, tightness or discomfort in the arms, shortness of breath and a general feeling of being unwell.

If you experience one or several of these symptoms, and they progressively get worse for at least 10 minutes, it is important to tell someone.

**Call 000 without delay.**

### High blood pressure

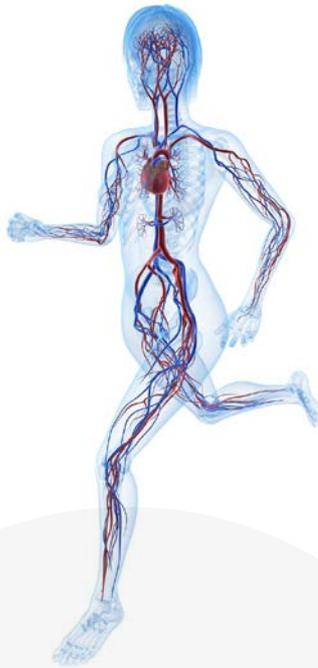
Continuously high blood pressure can damage arteries, the heart and other organs and adds to the risk of having a heart attack and stroke.

### Stroke

If an artery to the brain becomes blocked, or blood vessels in the brain bleed, damage to that part of the brain may cause loss of consciousness, weakness, numbness, paralysis, dizziness, loss of balance, blurred or decreased vision, and difficulty in speaking or understanding.

## Causes of cardiovascular disease

Causes can be related to lifestyle, such as lack of physical activity, poor nutrition and smoking. Some causes such as a family history of heart disease can't be changed and some causes are lesser known, such as depression and being socially isolated.



## What can you do for cardiovascular health?

The way to prevent cardiovascular disease is to do something about the causes that put you at risk.

- Know and understand your blood pressure numbers – get regular checks
- Know and understand your cholesterol levels – get regular checks
- Try a diet rich in vegetables, fruit, low-fat dairy foods, nuts, wholegrains, fish, chicken and lean meat, keeping saturated fats and salt to a minimum (eg the DASH diet) – this type of diet can help reduce blood pressure

- Soluble fibre is important in lowering 'bad' (LDL) cholesterol, so include foods such as oats, muesli, oat and rice bran, barley, legumes, fruit and vegetables
- Plant sterols lower cholesterol levels by stopping the absorption of cholesterol from the gut – they are found naturally in vegetable oils and most plant foods but are also in products such as spreads (eg Pro-Activ®) and milks (eg HeartActive®)
- Aim for 30 minutes of moderate activity on most days
- Don't have more than two standard alcoholic drinks per day
- Take steps to manage your weight if you are overweight
- Depression and diabetes have been linked to cardiovascular disease, so it is important to manage these conditions
- Some medications will help to lower cholesterol or manage high blood pressure – discuss medications with your doctor
- A doctor is your best source of information. Referral to other accredited health practitioners may also help, such as:
  - cardiologists to test and monitor your heart conditions
  - dietitians to help with weight management and healthy eating
  - psychologists if you have feelings of depression or loneliness
  - exercise physiologists to help identify the right physical activity for your age, lifestyle and medical conditions
  - naturopaths for advice about supplements and vitamins.

For more information go to [jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/cardiovascular-health](http://jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/cardiovascular-health)

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This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your medical practitioner.

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Jean Hailes for Women's Health takes a broad and inclusive approach to the topic of women's health. This fact sheet generally uses the terms 'women' and 'girls'. These terms are intended to include women with diverse sexualities, intersex women, and women with a transgender experience.

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