

## Heart Care

If you don't suffer from heart disease yourself, you probably know someone who does. According to the Centers for Disease Control, almost 700,000 people die of heart disease in the U.S. each year. That is about 29 percent of all U.S. deaths.

Like many other diseases, treatment of the various conditions included in heart disease has gotten better in recent years. Below is information about heart disease. UnitedHealthcare Community Plan's mission is designed to help our members who have heart disease stay as healthy as possible.

[What is a Heart Attack?](#)

[What is Heart Failure?](#)

[What is a Stroke?](#)

[Do You Know Your Own Risk Factors?](#)

### What is a Heart Attack?

Information found on this page about heart attacks is available from the American Heart Association. A heart attack occurs when the blood supply to the heart muscle is partly or entirely blocked off. The blockage is usually from the buildup of plaque, a fat-like substance caused by high cholesterol.

#### Warning Signs...

The most common warning signals of a heart attack:

- Uncomfortable pressure, fullness, squeezing, or pain in the center of the chest lasting more than a few minutes
- Pain spreading to the shoulders, neck, or arms
- Chest discomfort with lightheadedness, fainting, sweating, sickness, or shortness of breath

Less common warning signs of a heart attack are:

- Unusual chest, stomach, or abdominal pain
- Nausea or dizziness
- Shortness of breath and difficulty breathing
- Unexplained anxiety, weakness, or fatigue
- Heart fluttering, cold sweat, or paleness

#### Things you should know...

There are medicines that have been proven helpful in avoiding a second heart attack. These medicines are called beta-blockers.

After someone has a heart attack, the heart tries to make up for its weakened pumping action by beating faster. This puts more strain on the heart. A beta-blocker is a type of medicine that blocks a faster heartbeat. Beta-blockers are often used together with other medicines, including aspirin, to lessen the chances of a second heart attack.

### What is Heart Failure?

Heart failure, or congestive heart failure (CHF), is when the heart is unable to pump enough blood to meet the body's needs. Heart failure usually develops slowly as a result of a problem with the heart, such as a heart attack, high blood pressure, cholesterol build-up in the blood vessels, or diabetes. Some other causes can be alcohol abuse, severe emphysema, and rheumatic fever.

According to the American Heart Association, about five million Americans are living with heart failure. Heart failure affects all ages, but it is more common in people over the age of 65. While CHF is a serious and chronic condition, it can be controlled with medicines, diet, and an exercise program recommended by a doctor.

#### Warning Signs...

At times, heart failure can worsen quickly. It's important that you contact your doctor if you have one or more of the symptoms listed below:

- Shortness of breath, not related to exercise or effort
- Swollen feet, ankles, and legs
- Low energy, weakness, dizziness, or fainting
- Trouble sleeping (waking up short of breath)
- Sudden weight gain with stomach swelling, pain, and tenderness
- Frequent dry, hacking cough, especially when lying down

#### **Things you should know...**

Ask your doctor about ACE inhibitors and beta-blockers. ACE inhibitors have been proven to slow the progression of heart failure. These drugs lessen the heart's workload. Beta-blockers are also used for mild to moderate heart failure, often with other drugs like ACE inhibitors.

#### **What is a Stroke?**

The National Stroke Association has called a stroke a "brain attack." The brain is the most fragile organ in the body. A stroke or brain attack should be paid attention to right away, just like a heart attack. A stroke happens when a blockage (clot) in a blood vessel stops the blood from nourishing the brain, or when cracked vessels leak blood, putting pressure on the brain.

#### **Warning Signs...**

Most people do not know the range of stroke symptoms:

- Sudden numbness of the face, arm, or leg, especially on one side of the body
- Sudden confusion or trouble speaking and understanding
- Sudden trouble seeing by one or both eyes
- Sudden difficulty walking; dizziness; loss of balance or coordination
- Severe headaches with no known cause

#### **Things you should know...**

If you have an irregular or very uneven heartbeat, you might have a condition known as atrial fibrillation, which can be dangerous if not controlled or watched. This condition adds to your risk of having a stroke. In order to prevent a stroke, your doctor may try to get your heart back to a regular beat. Ask your doctor about blood thinners, which reduce the chance of a stroke when the heart beats irregularly. For some people, irregular heartbeats are temporary, but for others they will always be irregular.

#### **Do You Know Your Own Risk Factors?**

Certain risk factors can increase your risk of heart disease, and in some cases, a stroke. The more risk factors you have, the greater your chances of having a heart attack or stroke. Some risk factors, such as gender, race, family medical history, or previous heart attack or stroke, are beyond your control. But there are also risk factors you can control, treat, or prevent.

These include:

- Smoking and secondhand smoke exposure
- High cholesterol
- High blood pressure
- Physical inactivity
- Obesity
- Diabetes

Other factors that may add to your risk of heart attack or stroke include:

- Stress
- Hormonal factors
- Birth control pills
- Too much alcohol
- Tobacco and illegal drugs

Follow your doctor's orders. Your treatment plan may include medicine, diet, and exercise programs.

Please call the customer service number on your ID Card if you have questions about Heart Health.

**References:**

American Heart Association, Congestive Heart Failure, [www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org), (11/20/2007)