

Heart Disease – how treatments can help

Healthy arteries carry a steady supply of blood to your heart. Without this blood, your heart can't work properly. But sometimes the arteries become too narrow – and this can cause heart disease.

Why do arteries become narrow?

Over time, a fatty substance called 'plaque' can build up on the inside of the artery wall clogging the arteries so that less blood gets to the heart.

What happens when arteries become narrow?

It can lead to angina or a heart attack.

- Angina happens when the heart isn't getting enough blood. Symptoms include chest pressure, tightness in the chest, arm pain. Sometimes people feel sweaty or nauseous too. These signs mean there may be something wrong with your heart and you need medical help as soon as possible. Angina isn't the same as a heart attack, but it can increase your risk of having one.
- A heart attack happens if a clot forms in an artery that is already narrowed by plaque and this stops blood getting to the heart. If the blood supply is cut off for long enough it can cause permanent damage to the heart. If someone has a heart attack, the quicker they get to hospital the more they minimise the damage to the heart muscle.

What about treatment?

Hospitals have treatments to open up blocked arteries. If the artery can be unblocked quickly, there is less damage to the heart. Your doctor will arrange a special x-ray called an angiogram to see where and how badly the arteries are clogged. Your doctor can then advise you on treatment. Some people with angina may only need medication. But if you have had a heart attack, you will need medication and an angioplasty or surgery.

Medications

- can help dissolve clots blocking arteries
- can thin the blood, lowering the risk of heart attack or stroke
- can lower high blood pressure
- can lower cholesterol. It's one of the causes of blocked arteries.
- ease angina symptoms
- help heal the heart muscle if there has been any damage.

Angioplasty

This simple operation improves blood flow to the heart by widening the artery. It can be done under a local anaesthetic. It involves just a short stay in hospital. The doctor widens the artery by putting a special balloon into the clogged artery. Once the balloon is in the artery, the doctor blows it up before removing it. This widens

the artery. The doctor then puts a metal tube (called a 'stent') into the widened artery. This tube stays in the artery to keep it open.

Bypass surgery.

This operation makes another way for blood to get to the heart. The doctor 'borrows' another artery from the person's body (from the chest, leg or arm). This healthy artery is then attached to the blocked artery so that it can carry blood around the blockage and into the heart. This operation means a general anaesthetic and a longer stay in hospital. Like angioplasty, it is usually a safe and successful operation.

What else is important?

Healthy habits. Clogged arteries are usually caused by things we can control, like smoking, diet and being inactive. It's important to:

- Stop smoking. Smoking damages and weakens artery walls.
- Avoid unhealthy saturated fat - fat found in fatty meat, full fat dairy products, butter, ghee, lard, solid cooking fat, coconut milk, fried takeaway foods and many biscuits, cakes and pies bought from shops.
- Be active. Regular physical activity such as walking is good for the heart. If you have had a heart attack, your doctor can refer you to a program to teach you good ways to exercise and manage your heart condition.

If you need help making phone calls in English, ring the Translating and Interpreting Service on 131 450.

You can find more health information in your language on the Multicultural Communication website at <http://www.mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au>

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.