

Health Spotlight: Heart Disease

Our latest article in the Health Spotlight series looks at how you can reduce your risk of heart disease.

- Coronary heart disease led to more than 2,000 excess deaths and almost 14,000 total deaths in Australia in 2022¹
- Coronary heart disease was the leading cause of death in Australia in 2021²
- About 570,000 Australians had heart disease in 2020-21³
- On average, 118 Australians die from heart disease every day⁴

What is heart disease?

Heart disease is an umbrella term that includes all heart, stroke and blood vessel diseases, and is one of Australia's largest health problems. Common types of heart disease include coronary heart disease, stroke, heart failure and cardiomyopathy, atrial fibrillation and peripheral arterial disease.

Coronary heart disease – which brings on heart attacks – is the most common type of heart disease. It occurs when your heart's blood supply is blocked or interrupted, affecting the process of circulation – when your heart pumps blood to your lungs to pick up oxygen, and then across to your other organs. Of all hospitalisations for heart disease in 2020-21, 27 per cent of patients had a primary diagnosis of coronary heart disease.³

Warning signs

Common symptoms of heart disease can include chest pain, shortness of breath, feeling faint or sick. However, if you are in the early stage of heart disease you may not notice any symptoms.

A number of medical tests are commonly used to detect heart disease, including echocardiograms (ECGs), coronary angiography, blood tests and exercise stress tests. Doctors will also take into account your family history and lifestyle when making a diagnosis.

In addition, screening tests for heart disease can be carried out by doctors as you get older, including measuring your cholesterol levels, blood pressure and weight.

Risk factors

Heart disease disproportionately affects men, socially disadvantaged people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.³ If you are over 45, smoke or have other underlying conditions such as diabetes, you may be also more at risk of heart disease.⁵

Obesity and being overweight increase your risk of heart disease as well. Excess weight can raise your blood pressure and increase your cholesterol levels, both of which can be warning signs of the early stages of heart disease.

Lifestyle factors can be key to reducing your risk of heart disease. Most risk factors are preventable through a healthy diet and regular exercise. Even something as simple as eating five or more servings of vegetables a day can reduce your risk of heart disease by 17 per cent.⁴

How to protect yourself

- From the age of 45, ensure you are regularly screened for heart disease and for other risk factors such as blood pressure and cholesterol
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle by having a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, and having a schedule for regular exercise
- If you smoke or drink, you should look at reducing or cutting out these activities
- Manage your stress, as this can cause high blood pressure which increases your heart disease risk
- Knowing your risk as a result of these factors, it may be worthwhile considering taking up life insurance to protect what you value most in life.

1 COVID-19 Mortality Working Group: Almost 20,000 excess deaths for 2022 in Australia. The Actuaries Institute, 6 March 2022

2 Causes of Death, Australia. Australian Bureau of Statistics, April 2023

3 Heart, stroke and vascular disease: Australian facts. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, February 2023

4 Key statistics: Cardiovascular disease. The Heart Foundation, 2019

5 Should I be tested for heart disease? Healthdirect.gov.au, November 2020

