



# Heart Attack and Stroke Are Striking Younger People More Often

Heart attacks and strokes are main causes of disability and death in the U.S. And you don't have to be lining up for senior discounts to be at risk for these common health problems.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says [middle-aged people](#) are being hit hard. People are having strokes and heart attacks at younger ages. In fact, the stroke rate among younger adults has steadily increased over the past two decades, even as the overall incidence of stroke has decreased.

Heart disease (including coronary heart disease, hypertension and stroke) is the No. 1 cause of death in the U.S. Coronary heart disease — narrowing of blood vessels that bring oxygen and blood to the heart — alone accounts for 1 in 7 deaths. That's more than 366,800 people a year. Stroke ranks No. 5, killing nearly 133,000 people a year.

A **heart attack** happens when blood flow to a part of the heart is blocked by a blood clot. Clots that cut off blood flow completely can cause part of the heart muscle to die.

A **stroke** happens when a blood vessel in the brain — not the heart — is blocked by a clot. The lack of blood and oxygen may kill brain cells.

Heart attack and stroke have similar risk factors and ways you can lower your risk.

## You Can Protect Yourself

Eighty percent of premature heart disease and strokes [could have been prevented](#). Some factors, like family history, can't be changed. But most of the risk factors can be changed.

The CDC says almost **half of all Americans** (47 percent) have at least one of the three key risk factors for heart disease and stroke: high blood pressure, high cholesterol and smoking. High blood pressure, also called hypertension, [leads the risk factors for stroke in young people](#).

Other risk factors you can control include being overweight, not getting enough activity, drinking too much alcohol and poor nutrition. Diabetes that is not well controlled also increases the risk for heart attack and stroke.

## Take Action to Lower Your Risk

**Control related health conditions.** If you're overweight or have high cholesterol, high blood pressure or diabetes that isn't well controlled, talk to your doctor about how you can make improvements.

**Don't smoke.** If you smoke, stop. Get help through counseling, nicotine replacement or other medications.

**Limit alcohol.** Alcohol can increase your blood pressure, a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke. If you drink, [make sure you're not drinking too much](#).

**Get moving.** If you aren't currently active, start out with walking. Just 30 minutes a day at a moderate pace can lower your risk of heart attack and stroke. You can split that up into short walks throughout the day if that helps you get it done. People are spending more time than ever sitting — at their computers or on their couches watching TV. That lack of exercise raises risk for obesity and Type 2 diabetes, which make heart disease more likely.

**Eat better.** Even small changes can make a big difference. Look at your plate. Half should contain vegetables. Cut back on simple carbs and starches. Have more whole grains. Eating healthy foods helps manage your weight, keep blood pressure and cholesterol in a healthy range, and prevent or manage diabetes. All are factors in heart disease and stroke.

A food plan like the Mediterranean diet, focused on whole grains, low-fat dairy, fruits and vegetables, can help. The American Heart Association suggests the [DASH diet](#), also low in red meats, sweets and processed foods. Research also shows that lowering salt in your diet makes a difference in blood pressure.

## See Your Doctor Regularly

Getting routine health care is important, even if you're middle-aged or younger, don't currently have major risk factors or don't think you need to worry about your heart, said the American Heart Association's Dr. Nieca Goldberg, a cardiologist and leader in the area of heart health.

Your doctor will check your blood pressure, cholesterol and other health measures, giving you a baseline to use to track your health going forward. And if a problem does develop, regular checkups will let you know early when it's easiest to address it.

Be sure to talk to your doctor about your family health history. If you've had a close relative — father, mother, sister or brother — with heart disease, you'll want to tell your doctor about that, Goldberg said.

"You have to multitask to prevent heart disease," Goldberg said. Learn your risks. Then you can start taking steps to help prevent heart disease and stroke.



### Just get started.

Take the first small steps to improve your health and lower your risk. Talk to your doctor about what your risk factors are and how to lower them. And start eating foods that are good for you and add more exercise to your day. When you start living a healthier life, you can help your family live better, too.

## Learn the signs of heart attack and stroke.

The signs of heart attack and stroke are different. Learning them can save a life — your own or a loved one's.

## Stroke

For stroke, remember [FAST](#):

Face droop

Arm weakness

Speech Slurring

Time to call 9-1-1 — for any of these signs, even if they go away later

## Heart Attack

Look for these signs, says the [American Heart Association](#).

Pain in the chest. Half the people having a heart attack say they feel tightness in their upper chest that feels like an elephant is sitting on their chest. Others will feel pressure in their lower chest. This symptom is often mistaken for stomach problems.

Pain in the arms, back, neck, jaw or stomach

Shortness of breath

Weakness, lightheadedness or cold sweat

Nausea or vomiting

Signs of a heart attack aren't the same for everyone. And [women's symptoms](#) may be different than men's. Women are somewhat more likely to experience shortness of breath, nausea or vomiting, and back or jaw pain.

If you think you're having a heart attack, take it seriously. Act quickly and call 9-1-1. Don't just take an aspirin to see if it helps. Don't just go online to look at heart attack symptoms. The sooner you get to the hospital, the sooner doctors can take steps to limit the damage.

Sources: [High blood pressure tops list of factors contributing to stroke in young adults](#), American Heart Association (AHA), 2019; [Study: High blood pressure and prediabetes together increase risk to heart](#), AHA, 2018; [Heart Disease and Stroke Statistics 2018 at a glance](#), AHA, 2018; [Warning Signs of a Heart Attack](#), AHA, 2016; [Managing Blood Pressure with a Heart Healthy Diet](#), AHA, 2016; [Preventing 1 Million Heart Attacks and Strokes](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2018; [Heart Disease Risk Factors](#), CDC, 2015; [Preventing Heart Disease: What You Can Do](#), CDC, 2015; [Stroke Risk](#), CDC, 2017; [Preventing Stroke: Healthy Living](#), CDC, 2018; [Preventing Stroke: Control Medical Conditions](#), CDC, 2018; [Together to End Stroke](#), American Stroke Association, 2019; [Heart Disease Statistics](#), American College of Cardiology