

Q. My friend went to the doctor and got a clean bill of health – and then a short time later had a heart attack. What happened? And how can I be sure my heart is OK?

A. Your experience with your friend is not too unusual. Coronary heart disease is primarily caused by an accumulation of cholesterol in the arteries, limiting the free flow of blood. There are usually no symptoms until the artery is 90% plugged. With no symptoms, it appeared that your friend was doing fine.

The actual heart attack usually occurs when the cholesterol-damaged artery develops a small rupture on the inside, triggering platelets to gather in an attempt to shore up the damage. But because of the small opening in the artery, it plugs it up, causing the heart attack and severe symptoms. For many people, this is the first symptom they experience, and for some it is fatal.

This scenario points out the importance of taking preventive action early before the serious heart attack occurs. The best way to know if your arteries are in good health or not is to look at the risk factors linked to early heart disease:

Coronary Risk



- ✓ Is your **total blood cholesterol level** too high (200 mg/dL or higher; <160 is ideal)?
- ✓ Is your **HDL cholesterol level** too low (<45 for men or <55 for women; 55-60+ is ideal)?
- ✓ Is your **blood pressure** high (140/90 or higher; <120/80 is ideal)?
- ✓ Is your **fasting blood sugar** high (126 mg/dL or higher; ideally <90 mg/dL)?

Other strong indicators include smoking, lack of regular physical activity (30+ minutes 5+ days/week is

recommended), excess body weight (especially around your middle; a waist circumference of 35+ inches for women or 40+ inches for men), and in some people, high levels of unresolved stress. New research also shows that people who are low in vitamin D (common in Northern States and people who get little sun) are more likely to have damaged arteries and early heart disease.

The more of these risk factors you have, the higher your risk of developing unhealthy arteries early in life. Take action now. Don't wait for symptoms. Get help from your doctor. Develop a daily walking program. Learn to eat heart-healthy foods (see link below). Studies of large groups of people show that people who live healthy and have no risk factors can cut their risk of early heart disease by 80-90%.

For more information on how to develop a heart healthy lifestyle, go to www.wellsourc.info and enter the following access code: **CHD911**.

