



Heart Diseases

Heart disease describes a range of conditions that affect your heart. Diseases under the heart disease umbrella include blood vessel diseases, such as coronary artery disease; heart rhythm problems (arrhythmias); and heart defects you're born with (congenital heart defects), among others.

Carl Willeford, Jr., MSN, FNP-C, can discuss any concerns you have with your heart, as well as any symptoms you may think you have of pending issues. He may also do an EKG while you are in the office so that he can have a base-line reading and knowledge of the electrical activity taking place in your heart. If he deems it necessary, Mr. Willeford can refer you to a health care professional who specializes in heart disease and issues.

Remember that the term "heart disease" is often used interchangeably with the term "cardiovascular disease." Cardiovascular disease generally refers to conditions that involve narrowed or blocked blood vessels that can lead to a heart attack, chest pain (angina) or stroke. Other heart conditions, such as those that affect your heart's muscle, valves or rhythm, also are considered forms of heart disease.

Many forms of heart disease can be prevented or treated with healthy lifestyle choices. Read on for additional information regarding heart disease, and what you can do to help yourself.

Symptoms

Heart disease symptoms depend on what type of heart disease you have.

Symptoms of heart disease in your blood vessels (atherosclerotic disease)

Cardiovascular disease symptoms may be different for men and women. For instance, men are more likely to have chest pain; women are more likely to have other symptoms along with chest discomfort, such as shortness of breath, nausea and extreme fatigue.

Symptoms can include:

- Chest pain, chest tightness, chest pressure and chest discomfort (angina)

- Shortness of breath
- Pain, numbness, weakness or coldness in your legs or arms if the blood vessels in those parts of your body are narrowed
- Pain in the neck, jaw, throat, upper abdomen or back

You might not be diagnosed with cardiovascular disease until you have a heart attack, angina, stroke or heart failure. It's important to watch for cardiovascular symptoms and discuss concerns with your doctor. Cardiovascular disease can sometimes be found early with regular evaluations.

Heart disease symptoms caused by abnormal heartbeats (heart arrhythmias)

A heart arrhythmia is an abnormal heartbeat. Your heart may beat too quickly, too slowly or irregularly. Heart arrhythmia symptoms can include:

- Fluttering in your chest
- Racing heartbeat (tachycardia)
- Slow heartbeat (bradycardia)
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Shortness of breath
- Lightheadedness
- Dizziness
- Fainting (syncope) or near fainting

Heart disease symptoms caused by heart defects

Serious congenital heart defects — defects you're born with — usually become evident soon after birth. Heart defect symptoms in children could include:

- Pale gray or blue skin color (cyanosis)
- Swelling in the legs, abdomen or areas around the eyes

- In an infant, shortness of breath during feedings, leading to poor weight gain

Less serious congenital heart defects are often not diagnosed until later in childhood or during adulthood. Signs and symptoms of congenital heart defects that usually aren't immediately life-threatening include:

- Easily getting short of breath during exercise or activity
- Easily tiring during exercise or activity
- Swelling in the hands, ankles or feet

Heart disease symptoms caused by weak heart muscle (dilated cardiomyopathy)

In early stages of cardiomyopathy, you may have no symptoms. As the condition worsens, symptoms may include:

- Breathlessness with exertion or at rest
- Swelling of the legs, ankles and feet
- Fatigue
- Irregular heartbeats that feel rapid, pounding or fluttering
- Dizziness, lightheadedness and fainting

Heart disease symptoms caused by heart infections

Endocarditis is an infection that affects the inner membrane that separates the chambers and valves of the heart (endocardium). Heart infection symptoms can include:

- Fever
- Shortness of breath
- Weakness or fatigue
- Swelling in your legs or abdomen
- Changes in your heart rhythm

- Dry or persistent cough
- Skin rashes or unusual spots

Heart disease symptoms caused by valvular heart disease

The heart has four valves — the aortic, mitral, pulmonary and tricuspid valves — that open and close to direct blood flow through your heart. Valves may be damaged by a variety of conditions leading to narrowing (stenosis), leaking (regurgitation or insufficiency) or improper closing (prolapse).

Depending on which valve isn't working properly, valvular heart disease symptoms generally include:

- Fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Irregular heartbeat
- Swollen feet or ankles
- Chest pain
- Fainting (syncope)

When to see a health care practitioner

Seek emergency medical care if you have these heart disease symptoms:

- Chest pain
- Shortness of breath
- Fainting

Heart disease is easier to treat when detected early, so talk to your health care practitioner about your concerns regarding your heart health. If you're concerned about developing heart disease, talk to your health care practitioner about steps you can take to reduce your heart disease risk. This is especially important if you have a family history of heart disease.

