

# Understanding coronary artery disease

Coronary artery disease (CAD) is the most common type of heart disease. CAD is a serious but manageable condition, and understanding the causes, symptoms, and treatments can help you take steps toward better heart health.



## What is coronary artery disease?

CAD develops when the arteries that supply blood to the heart muscle become narrowed or blocked by plaque—a buildup of cholesterol, fat, and other substances. This buildup reduces or blocks blood flow to the heart muscle, limiting the oxygen it receives. If the blockage becomes severe or the plaque ruptures, it can lead to chest pain and possibly a heart attack.



## Know the signs and symptoms

CAD can develop slowly over time. You may not notice symptoms until a significant blockage occurs. In some cases, like when plaque ruptures suddenly, the first sign may be a heart attack.

### Symptoms of CAD can include:

- Mild chest pain or discomfort called angina, that is being managed by your care team
- Shortness of breath with activity
- Fatigue
- Numbness or weakness in feet

### Symptoms of heart attack can include:

- Sudden onset chest pain (angina)
- Shortness of breath at rest
- Severe indigestion or heartburn that does not improve with antacids
- Pain in the neck, jaw, shoulder, arm, or back felt between the shoulder blades

**If you think you're having a heart attack, immediately call 911.**



## Diagnosing coronary artery disease

Diagnosis usually begins with a checkup, where your doctor asks about symptoms such as chest pain or shortness of breath and reviews risk factors like high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, and family history. Based on this information, your doctor may recommend further tests, such as:

- Blood tests that show cholesterol and blood sugar levels to get a better understanding of your heart health
- An electrocardiogram (ECG) to check the heart's electrical activity
- An echocardiogram, which uses sound waves to make pictures of the heart
- A stress test to show how well your heart works during exercise

These tests help doctors find any narrow spots in your arteries and determine the best way to keep your heart healthy.



## Managing coronary artery disease

Because CAD can show no symptoms for years, regular checkups and heart health screenings are very important. There are also steps you can take to manage CAD, including:

- Following a heart-healthy diet (low in saturated fats and cholesterol)
- Exercising regularly
- Stopping smoking (if you're a smoker)
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Managing stress
- Taking blood thinners and blood pressure or cholesterol-lowering medications as prescribed

## Procedures to help manage CAD



### Angioplasty and stenting

A minimally invasive procedure used to open narrowed or blocked coronary arteries. A catheter is used to open the blocked artery and place a small mesh tube (stent) in it to keep it open.



### Coronary artery bypass grafting (CABG)

A surgical procedure that uses a blood vessel from another part of the body to create a new route around the blockage.



### Atherectomy

A catheter-based procedure that removes plaque from the artery wall using a blade, laser, or tiny drill.



## We are here to help

Your Interwell Health Care Team can help you learn more about coronary artery disease and ways you can help manage it. Reach out for any support you need.