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SOUTH PACIFIC COMMISSION  
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## Heart disease - fatal disease

### What are heart diseases?

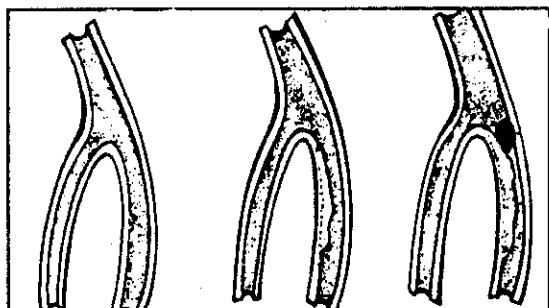
Heart diseases are diseases of the heart and blood vessels. The medical term is cardiovascular disease.

### How serious are heart diseases in the Pacific?

In the past, heart diseases were almost unknown in the Pacific Islands. Today, they are the major cause of death in developed Pacific Island communities, especially among adults. Heart disease is the No. 1 killer in 12 Pacific Island countries. It is in the top four causes of death in 21 of 22 Island countries.

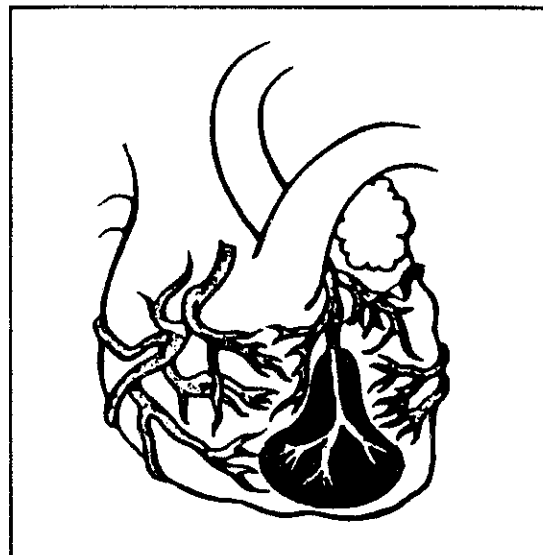
### What is coronary heart disease?

The most common type of heart disease is **coronary heart disease**. Coronary heart disease is caused when the blood vessels that supply blood to the heart muscle become clogged with fatty deposits. This is called atherosclerosis or narrowing of the blood vessels. Because of these fatty deposits, not enough blood can get to the heart muscle when it is pumping hard.



atherosclerosis of a blood vessel

When this happens, the heart muscle does not get enough blood and oxygen; this causes severe chest pain called angina. Narrowing of the blood vessels can then lead to a heart attack. Smoking and high blood pressure make this problem worse. Other diseases that can lead to heart disease include **high blood pressure, diabetes and gout**.



A diseased heart

Heart disease cannot be cured. Once the heart is damaged, it is very difficult to repair it.

### What is a heart attack?

A heart attack happens when part of the heart muscle dies after its blood supply is blocked. This is usually caused by a blood clot forming on the fatty deposits in the blood vessels supplying the heart.

This clot can get stuck in the narrowed blood vessel, blocking off the blood supply. Heart attacks are painful and are often fatal.

### How do you know if you have heart disease?

Most often people may feel fine and look healthy until they experience some pain or discomfort in their chest and other parts of the body. The most common signs and symptoms may include:

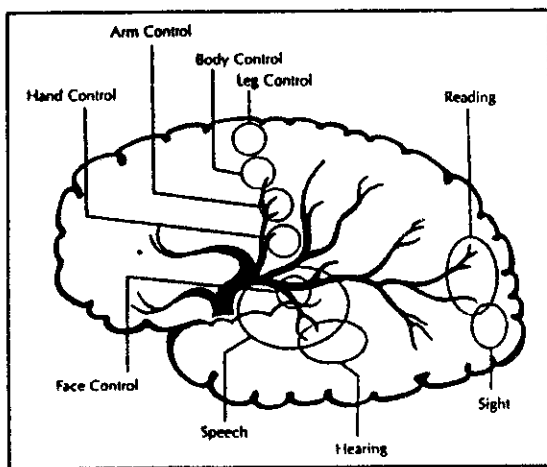
- ⊗ Heavy, squeezing pain or discomfort in the centre of the chest. This may last for several minutes. Sharp, stabbing pains do not usually mean heart disease;

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- ⊗ Pain which may start at the shoulder, arm, neck or jaw;
- ⊗ Anxiety, sweating, nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath, dizziness, or fainting.

### What about stroke?

Stroke is caused in the same way as coronary heart disease by narrowing of blood vessels that, in this case, supply the brain with blood. When a blockage of one of the blood vessels to the brain occurs, part of the brain does not get enough blood.



The symptoms of a stroke depend on which part of the brain is affected. The usual symptoms are weakness or paralysis of an arm or leg (or both) on one side of the body. Sometimes there is difficulty in talking. Strokes can be fatal and often lead to life-long handicap.

Signs of stroke may include:

- ⊗ weakness or numbness in the face, arm or leg;
- ⊗ loss of speech;
- ⊗ trouble in speaking or understanding speech;
- ⊗ dimness or loss of vision;
- ⊗ unexplained dizziness, unsteadiness or sudden falls.



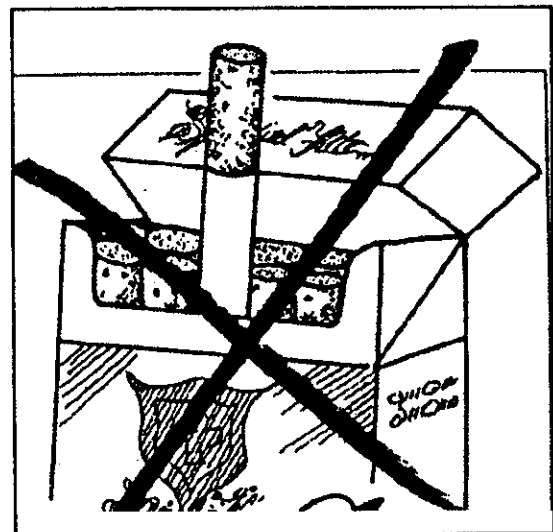
### What things lead to heart disease and stroke?

#### *Smoking tobacco*

Smoking is a major risk for heart attacks and strokes. Many more smokers than non-smokers die from heart disease.

#### *Eating a lot of food*

Fat and inactive people develop heart disease more often than people who are active and of normal weight. Fat people often eat **too much food**, or **too much of the wrong kind of food** (high in fat, sugar, salt and low in fibre).





### *Lack of activity*

People who are not active are more likely to put on weight and may develop heart disease.

### *Stress or worry*

Having too many worries can make you sick. It can cause high blood pressure in some people.

### *Drinking too much alcohol*

Alcohol is an energy-rich substance, but lacks most of the nutrients that are important to staying healthy. Drinking a lot of alcohol can make a person put on weight and can lead to other health problems such as diseases of the liver, nervous system and certain cancers.



### *Family history of heart disease*

We have to live with the kind of body we get from our parents. But we can avoid some of the habits

listed above and foods that are more likely to make our body sick. Good habits need to be learned as early as possible, so we can stay healthy when we get older.

## **Guidelines for prevention**

- ☺ **Visit your doctor** or the community health centre in your area *regularly* to make sure that your blood pressure is under control. **Not checking your blood pressure regularly** can increase your chance of heart attacks. If possible, have your blood fats and cholesterol checked at least once every three years.



- ☺ **Eat several healthy, low-fat foods every day.** Make sure that you avoid fatty foods such as butter, cream, margarine, cooking oil and foods that are high in salt and sugar and low in fibre. Avoid foods with 'hidden fats' in them, such as pastries, pies, cakes, doughnuts, chocolate, and rich desserts. Before you buy products, read the labels to make sure they don't have a lot of fat, sugar or salt.

Eat plenty of fresh vegetables and fruits every day. If fresh food is rare, use canned or frozen vegetables or fruit without added salt or sugar (check the label to be sure).

- ☺ **Stop smoking.** As stated earlier, smoking is a major risk in heart disease and strokes. A smoker who also has high blood pressure

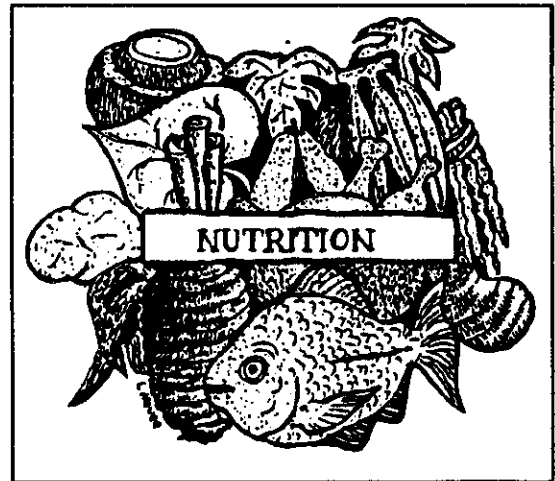
runs an even higher risk. Smokers who like to exercise regularly usually give up smoking.

- ☺ **Avoid drinking too much alcohol.** Alcohol causes many problems so it is better if you don't drink. If you do drink, only have one or two beers or drinks — this will keep you from putting on weight and having health problems.
- ☺ **Aim for a healthy weight.** Moderate to heavy exercise for about twenty minutes at least three times a week will keep you fit. Exercise also helps to reduce blood pressure. **Walking** is a good way to exercise. Other forms of activity such as gardening, cycling, dancing, swimming can be done at home or with friends.
- ☺ **Avoid too much stress.** Relax! Exercise can also reduce stress.



### Guidelines on food preparation

- ☺ Before cooking make sure you cut off all fat from meat and chicken.
- ☺ Throw away fatty drippings after cooking.
- ☺ Boil, grill or bake foods instead of frying.
- ☺ Avoid too much salt in cooking. Use herbs, spices, lemon or vinegar instead.



- ☺ Use only a little oil or butter when frying.
- ☺ Use low-fat products when cooking.

A variety of materials is available from the South Pacific Commission on the topic of heart disease. Some popular ones are listed below:

*A Heavy Loss*: healthy heart video  
— US\$ 20 (indicate PAL/SECAM/NTSC);

*Food, Drinks & Non-Communicable Diseases*: nutrition book  
— US\$ 8 including postage;

*Be healthy — Be fit — Stay slim and Prevent High Blood Pressure, Heart Disease, Diabetes*: posters  
— up to 15 copies free within region.

To order these materials, please write to:

Community Health Services  
South Pacific Commission  
B.P. D5  
Noumea Cedex  
New Caledonia

Fax: (687) 26.38.18

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