

## What is heart and blood vessel disease?

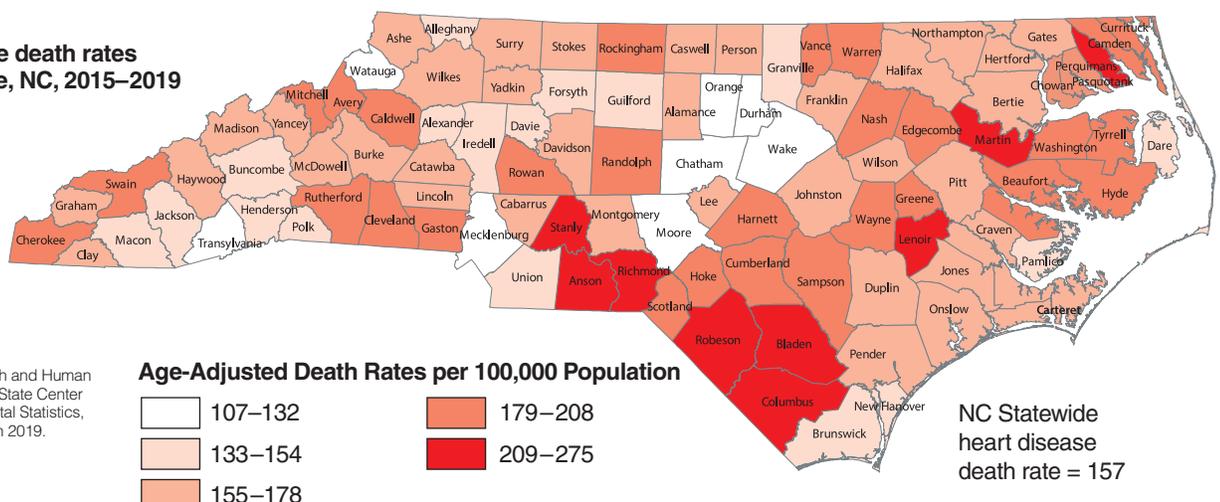
Heart and blood vessel disease is a term used to describe all the abnormal conditions that affect the heart and blood vessels. This includes conditions such as coronary artery disease (CAD), myocardial infarction (commonly known as heart attack), peripheral artery disease (PAD) and heart failure among many other conditions.

- Coronary artery disease is the most common type of heart disease and occurs when plaque builds up in the coronary arteries, blood vessels that carry blood to the heart muscle.
- A heart attack occurs when plaque completely blocks one or more coronary arteries. A heart attack is a medical emergency.
- Peripheral artery disease is a narrowing of the peripheral arteries of the legs, stomach, arms and head.
- Heart failure is another common type of heart disease that occurs when the heart muscle is weakened and cannot pump oxygen-rich blood with enough force to reach all the organs of the body.

## How many people are affected by heart disease?

- Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States and the second leading cause of death in North Carolina (NC).<sup>1,2</sup> In 2020, heart disease caused 20,443 deaths in NC. That's the equivalent of two heart disease deaths every hour and 19% of all deaths.<sup>2</sup>
- In 2020, 7.2% of NC adults reported that they have had a heart attack, angina or coronary heart disease in their lifetime.<sup>3</sup> This estimate excludes people living in long-term care facilities, and also excludes other conditions classified as heart disease, and is therefore probably an underestimate of those who have had heart disease in their lifetime.
- Heart disease led to 112,956 hospital admissions and \$6.5 billion in hospital charges in North Carolina in 2019.<sup>4</sup> That equates to one heart disease hospitalization almost every five minutes and over \$17 million in hospital charges for heart disease each day in the state.

**Figure 1. Heart disease death rates by county of residence, NC, 2015–2019**



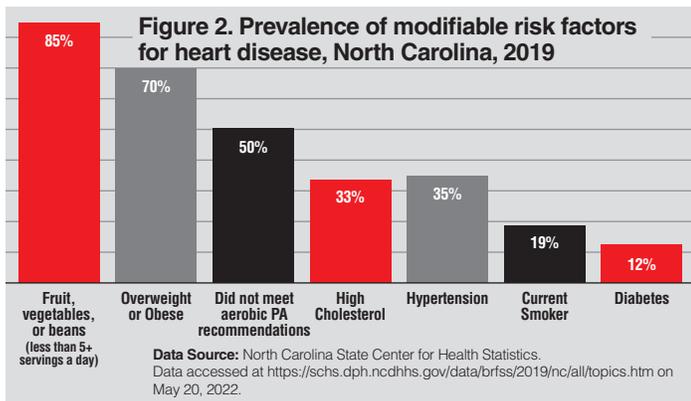
**Data Source:**  
North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health, State Center for Health Statistics. Health Atlas, Vital Statistics, Volume 2: Leading Causes of Death 2019.

## Disparities, inequality and inequity in the burden of heart disease

- North Carolina has the 30th highest age-adjusted heart disease death rate among the 50 states and Washington, D.C.<sup>5</sup>
- The eastern counties of NC tend to have a higher burden of heart disease (e.g., death and hospitalization rates) compared to the rest of the state. However, as evident in Figure 1, high rates of heart disease mortality also exist in some southern and western counties.
- American Indians/Alaska Natives and African-Americans have higher heart disease death rates compared to whites.<sup>5</sup>
- African-American North Carolinians are also more likely to die from heart disease and at a younger age compared to white non-Hispanic North Carolinians. In 2020, the proportion of heart disease deaths occurring before age 65 by race/ethnicity and gender were as follows:
  - 41% among African-American men
  - 23% among white men
  - 26% among African-American women
  - 12% among white women<sup>2</sup>

## What are the risk factors for heart and blood vessel disease?

- There are several risk factors for heart and blood vessel disease. Some factors can be controlled others cannot.
- Risk factors that cannot be controlled include age, gender, genetics and family history.
- Other risk factors that can be controlled include high blood pressure, high blood lipids (mainly LDL cholesterol), diabetes, smoking, overweight, obesity, unhealthy diet and physical inactivity (Figure 2).



## How can heart and blood vessel disease be prevented?

- Adopting a healthy lifestyle and managing risk factors can reduce the risk of developing heart disease. Visit [preventchronicdiseasenc.com](http://preventchronicdiseasenc.com) to learn more about key behaviors.
- Healthy lifestyle practices that help reduce the risk of heart disease include:
  - Maintaining a healthy weight or losing weight (for those who are overweight or obese). For information on achieving a healthy weight, please visit [esmmweighless.com](http://esmmweighless.com).
  - Regular physical activity and healthy eating (including reducing sodium intake). For general information on physical activity and healthy eating please visit [myeatSMARTmove.com](http://myeatSMARTmove.com).
  - Avoiding tobacco products and secondhand smoke for non-smokers and quitting for current smokers. For general information about smoking and how to get help quitting, please visit [quitlinenc.com](http://quitlinenc.com) or call 1-800-QUIT-NOW (1-800-784-8669).
  - Limiting alcohol consumption. Men should have no more than two drinks per day, and women should have no more than one. For more information, visit [cdc.gov/alcohol](http://cdc.gov/alcohol).
  - Working with your health care team to manage diabetes. For information on diabetes, please visit [DiabetesNC.com](http://DiabetesNC.com).
- A combination of lifestyle measures and medications may be necessary to control medical conditions that increase the risk of heart disease, such as high blood pressure, diabetes and high blood cholesterol. For fact sheets about hypertension, diabetes and obesity in North Carolina visit [communityclinicalconnections.com](http://communityclinicalconnections.com).

## What are the symptoms of heart and blood vessel disease?

- The symptoms of heart disease vary and depend on the specific condition.

### REFERENCES

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Leading causes of death. Accessed at [www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/leading-causes-of-death.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/leading-causes-of-death.htm) on May 18, 2022.

2. North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health, State Center for Health Statistics. 2020 Detailed Mortality Statistics for North Carolina. Accessed at <https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/data/vital.cfm> on May 18, 2022.

3. North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health, State Center for Health Statistics. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS). Data produced upon request on May 20, 2022.

4. North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health, State Center for Health Statistics. Inpatient Hospital Utilization and Charges by Principal, North Carolina, 2019. Data provided upon request on October 20, 2020.

- For heart attack, the major symptoms include:
  - Chest pain or discomfort.
  - Pain or discomfort in the arms, shoulder, jaw, neck or back.
  - Shortness of breath.
  - Feeling weak, light-headed or faint.

Over half of individuals who die suddenly from coronary heart disease, including heart attack, have had no previous symptoms. Absence of the above symptoms does not necessarily mean absence of risk for heart attack. To learn more about the signs and symptoms of heart attack visit [startwithyourheart.com/heart-healthy-and-stroke-free/heart-disease](http://startwithyourheart.com/heart-healthy-and-stroke-free/heart-disease).

- Common symptoms of heart failure include:
  - Shortness of breath during daily activities.
  - Having trouble breathing when lying down.
  - Weight gain with swelling in the feet, legs, ankles or stomach.
  - Generally feeling tired or weak.
- The most common symptoms of PAD are cramping, pain, or tiredness in the leg or hip muscles while walking or climbing stairs.

## What are the treatment options for heart and blood vessel disease?

- Treatment for heart disease depends on the specific condition.
- Regarding heart attack:
  - It is important to know the symptoms of heart attack and to immediately call 911 if you think you or someone else may be having a heart attack. The chance of survival, chance of recovery and degree of lasting disability are affected by the time lapse between the onset of heart attack symptoms and the start of treatment.
  - Although 89% of North Carolina adults say the first thing they would do if they thought someone was having a heart attack is to call 911, only 14% actually know all the signs and symptoms of a heart attack.<sup>6</sup> This means a majority of North Carolinians may not be able to identify a heart attack when it occurs. To learn more about the signs and symptoms of a heart attack, visit [startwithyourheart.com](http://startwithyourheart.com).
  - Treatment for a heart attack generally involves advanced medical and surgical procedures to restore blood flow to the heart muscle.
- For heart failure, medications and sodium reduction are the cornerstones of treatment.
- For PAD, quitting smoking and other lifestyle changes, exercise and medications may slow the progression or even reverse the symptoms.
- In addition to specific treatment procedures for a given condition, lifestyle changes and medical treatment of risk factors are major components of the treatment of heart disease.

5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. National Vital Statistics System, Mortality 1999-2020 on CDC WONDER Online Database, released in 2021. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/ucd-icd10.html> on May 20, 2022.

6. North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health, State Center for Health Statistics. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS). Accessed at <https://schs.dph.ncdhhs.gov/data/brfss/2014/nc/all/topics.htm> on December 13, 2018.

In addition to the above references, this fact sheet was developed with heavy reliance on information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website: [cdc.gov/heartdisease](http://cdc.gov/heartdisease).