HEART DISEASE IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

KNOW THE FACTS
WHAT IS HEART DISEASE?

Heart disease is a broad term meaning any disease affecting the heart. It is commonly used to refer to coronary heart disease (CHD), a more specific term to describe reduced blood supply to the myocardium (heart muscle) caused by plaques (fatty deposits) in the coronary arteries (the blood vessels which supply the heart muscle).

CORONARY HEART DISEASE
- CAN LEAD TO ANGINA OR ACUTE MYOCARDIAL INFARCTION (COMMONLY KNOWN AS HEART ATTACK).
- CORONARY HEART DISEASE IS ALSO KNOWN AS CORONARY ARTERY DISEASE (CAD) AND ISCHAEMIC HEART DISEASE (IHD).

CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE
- (CVD) DESCRIBES A WIDE RANGE OF CONDITIONS WHICH AFFECT THE HEART AND/OR THE BLOOD VESSELS. CVD IS OFTEN USED TO DESCRIBE CORONARY HEART DISEASE (INCLUDING ANGINA AND HEART ATTACK), AS WELL AS STROKE.

ACUTE CORONARY SYNDROME
- (ACS) IS ANOTHER TERM USED TO DESCRIBE THE SUDDEN LOSS OF BLOOD SUPPLY TO THE HEART MUSCLE, INCLUDING HEART ATTACK.

Sources:
Healthdirect
Heart and circulatory conditions contribute most to the disease burden of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and are major contributors to the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and other Australians. Indigenous Australians are twice as likely to be affected by cardiovascular disease as non-Indigenous Australians, and more than ten times more likely to die as a result.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are also more likely to die from cardiovascular disease at a younger age than non-Indigenous people.

WHY ARE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE MORE OFTEN AFFECTED BY HEART DISEASE?

Indigenous people are more often affected by the risk factors for heart disease (such as smoking), by health conditions that can lead to heart problems (such as diabetes), and by other forms of heart disease (such as rheumatic fever).

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS FOR HEART DISEASE IN ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE?

While some risk factors for heart disease cannot be changed, most heart disease risk factors can be reduced by adopting a healthy lifestyle.

Many risk factors for heart disease are higher for Indigenous Australians.

These include:

- Smoking. Indigenous Australians rate of smoking is twice that of the non-Indigenous population. Passive smoking or being exposed to second-hand smoke also leads to a higher risk of developing heart disease and cancer. It is estimated that two in five Indigenous people smoke and one in five deaths of Indigenous people is caused by smoking. It is the single most important risk factor for heart disease in Indigenous Australians.

- High Blood Pressure. Indigenous Australians are more likely to have high blood pressure than non-Indigenous people. This raises the risk of coronary heart disease, heart failure, and stroke and kidney disease. Many Indigenous people have high blood pressure but do not know that they have the condition.

- Diabetes. Indigenous Australians are three times more likely to have diabetes than non-Indigenous people. Diabetes raises the risk of heart attack, angina and stroke by up to four times.

- Rheumatic Heart Disease (RHD). Acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease can lead to heart valve damage, hospitalisation and even death. Hospitalisation for rheumatic heart disease is four times higher for Indigenous men and nine times higher for Indigenous women than for non-Indigenous men and women. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have one of the highest rates of rheumatic heart disease in the world.

- Physical Activity. 62% of Indigenous people living in non-remote areas do not get enough physical activity.

- Obesity. Indigenous Australians are more likely to be above a healthy weight than non-Indigenous people. 60% of Indigenous men and 81% of Indigenous women have waist circumferences that place them at risk of developing chronic disease.

Sources:
Australian Indigenous Health InfoNet
The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
Healthy WA
Heart Foundation
Other Risk factors Include:

• Increasing age
• A family history of heart disease
• Being Male
• High Cholesterol
• Depression

WAYS TO REDUCE YOUR RISK OF CORONARY HEART DISEASE

These include:

• Stop smoking
• Drink less alcohol
• Manage your blood pressure
• Eat healthy foods and manage high blood cholesterol if needed
• Manage your diabetes (if necessary)
• Increase your physical activity – aim for 30 minutes or more of moderate intensity physical activity every day of the week
• Maintain a healthy weight
• Manage feeling sad or lonely, “My heart, my family, our culture”
• Take your medications as prescribed by your doctor
• Be in Control – get your health checked now

HEART ATTACK IN ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE

Indigenous Australians are twice as likely to have a heart attack than non-Indigenous people.

A heart attack can be the first sign of heart problems, as many of the underlying causes of heart disease, such as high blood pressure and cholesterol, can develop slowly over many years without causing symptoms.

The symptoms of a heart attack can include:

• Pain or discomfort in the centre of the chest
• Pain or discomfort in the arms, shoulders, neck, jaw or back
• Shortness of breath
• Nausea or vomiting
• Dizziness or light headed
• Cold sweats

Women’s symptoms of heart attack can be unusual. Women are more likely to experience shortness of breath, nausea, vomiting, and back or jaw pain than men. They are also more likely to experience cold sweats, overwhelming weakness or fatigue, anxiety, lathargy or loss of appetite.

A heart attack is a medical emergency and anyone experiencing these symptoms should seek medical help immediately.

IF YOU SUSPECT A HEART ATTACK CALL TRIPLE ZERO (000) AND ASK FOR AN AMBULANCE.

Written and Reviewed by Veris Health Communications

Sources:

Australian Government
Diabetes Australia
Heart Foundation
RDH Australia
World Health Organisation