

Sometimes high blood pressure clears up by itself before it has a chance to damage the heart and blood vessels, and sometimes it can be lowered to a safe level by diet, drugs, or surgery. If you have high blood pressure, it's not very sensible to become preoccupied with your blood pressure readings, because more important than the height of the pressure is the ability of your blood vessels to stand the strain. The best things that you can do for yourself are to follow your doctor's advice carefully, and to live, as well as you can, a life of moderation in all things.

(Some people have low blood pressure or hypotension. There is no need to worry about this, because low blood pressure is rarely associated with illness, and your physician will tell you if it is significant.)

CORONARY ARTERY DISEASE

When you hear that the man down the block has "heart trouble," a good guess might be that he has coronary artery disease. For heart disease caused by disease of the coronary arteries (which have the job of supplying the heart muscle itself with blood) is an increasingly common form of heart disease between the ages of 40 and 60 and occurs much more often among men than women.

The chief cause of coronary artery disease is thickening of the coronary arteries (coronary atherosclerosis), not infrequently associated with hypertension. Hardening of these arteries was formerly thought to be generally associated with aging, but there is now a widely-held theory that the roughening or thickening occurs when the body's mechanism for handling certain fatty particles (either eaten or developed within the body) breaks down. Intensive studies of this process are now being made.

When the coronary arteries become narrowed, the heart muscle receives a smaller amount of blood (this sometimes results in what is known as coronary insufficiency). However, the heart muscle is so strong that it is not easily affected. Many people are able to live quite comfortably

with coronary artery disease if they are careful not to place too great a strain on their hearts. Some people with a comparatively small amount of heart damage make themselves worse by worrying excessively or by refusing to slow down their pace of living.

Just about everyone is familiar with the term "heart attack," but not so many people know what it means or that the great majority of people survive their first attack.

The term heart attack usually means the sudden closing (occlusion) of a coronary artery by a blood clot (thrombus). This condition, which usually causes severe crushing pain in the chest, accompanied by weakness, pallor, and sweating, never occurs in a normal artery but only in one previously thickened or roughened. Sometimes the pain is mistaken for acute indigestion.

When such severe pain occurs, a doctor should be called immediately. He may prescribe various treatments, but most of the work of healing will be done by the body itself. When a coronary artery is closed, neighboring arteries increase in size and new branches develop to nourish the area surrounding the closed artery. During the healing period the heart needs as much rest as possible, so the patient must stay in bed for a considerable period.

In a majority of cases the healing is so successful that the patient can resume his normal activities, but sometimes some degree of insufficiency remains. If this is the case, the patient will be warned by symptoms (either difficulty in breathing or feelings of pressure or tightness in the chest) when he is overexerting. Medicine can usually relieve this discomfort.

Substances which prevent the blood from clotting (anticoagulants) may be helpful in reducing the complications of coronary thrombosis, and sometimes they help prevent or delay it. These drugs are given only under the supervision of a physician.

HEART ATTACK OR CORONARY THROMBOSIS