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Oklahoma leads the nation in heart disease

It always is good to be number one in something, such as first in your class, a championship sports team or collecting the most donations for a food drive. While Oklahomans have experienced a number of positive first-place rankings, there’s something less positive the state is known for. According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov/), Oklahoma [ranks first in the number of deaths related to heart disease](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/states/oklahoma/oklahoma.htm).

With February being National Heart Month, now is a good time to become informed about heart disease and how to prevent it.

What exactly is heart disease? This term refers to several types of heart conditions, said Diana Romano, [Oklahoma State University Extension](https://extension.okstate.edu/) assistant specialist.

# “The most common type of heart disease is coronary artery disease, which can cause a heart attack. Other types may involve your heart valves. In addition, the heart may not pump well and cause heart failure,” Romano said. “Heart disease isn’t just something that affects older people. In some cases, people are born with heart disease.”

Heart disease can occur when plaque builds up in the arteries, causing them to narrow and reducing blood flow to the heart. While some factors that lead to heart disease are out of your control, there are several factors people can control, including smoking, eating an unhealthy diet and not getting enough exercise.

Romano said high cholesterol, high blood pressure or diabetes also can increase the risk of heart disease.

“Symptoms of heart disease vary, depending on the type of disease you’re dealing with. Many people don’t experience any signs until they have a heart attack,” she said.

Signs of a heart attack can include:

* Chest pain or discomfort that doesn’t go away after a few minutes.
* Pain or discomfort in the jaw, neck or back.
* Nausea, light-headedness, weakness or cold sweat.
* Pain or discomfort in the arms or shoulder.
* Shortness of breath.

There are several medical tests your doctor can perform to diagnose heart disease, including chest X-rays, coronary angiograms, electrocardiograms or a stress test.

“Lifestyle changes can help lower your risk of heart disease. Be physically active and eat foods that are low in saturated fat, *trans* fat, sodium and added sugars,” Romano said. “Your doctor can help you learn about the best ways to reduce your risk of heart disease.”

OSU Extension offers research-based information about [health, nutrition and wellness on its website](https://extension.okstate.edu/topics/youth-family-health-and-home/health-nutrition-and-wellness/index.html). To learn more about heart disease, visit the [American Heart Association website](http://www.heart.org/).