What is Cardiovascular Disease?

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is the ‘umbrella’ term for all diseases that affect the heart (cardio) and blood vessels (vascular) of your body.1 This group of disorders includes:

- Coronary heart disease (CHD) or coronary artery disease (CAD)
- Peripheral arterial disease
- Rheumatic heart disease
- Congenital heart disease
- Cerebrovascular disease
- Pulmonary embolism

Heart Disease vs Cardiovascular Disease…
Is There a Difference?

Because the terms sound so similar, people often use them interchangeably. Heart disease is a term used to describe a range of disorders that affect the heart. It includes diseases of the blood vessels associated with the heart, such as coronary heart disease, but it also includes disorders such as an abnormal heart rate or rhythm (heart arrhythmia), and defects in the structure of the heart that some people are born with (congenital heart disease).

Coronary artery disease is the most common form of heart disease and develops when the major blood vessels (coronary arteries) supplying the heart with oxygen, blood and nutrients are damaged or diseased.3,4 It occurs when there is a build-up of fatty deposits inside the arteries, called atherosclerosis, and increases your risk of heart attacks.

In fact, when people talk about “heart disease” they often mean coronary heart disease.

Basically, cardiovascular diseases are different diseases affecting the structure or function of the heart or blood vessels. On the other hand, heart disease does not necessarily occur due to blocked blood vessels.

Hard Fact: In Jamaica and other Caribbean countries, CVDs account for four of the five leading causes of death5. 30% of all NCD related deaths in Jamaica are caused by cardiovascular diseases6.
Risk Factors for Cardiovascular Disease

While the direct causes of cardiovascular diseases are still unclear, there are numerous things that puts us at risk. The main risk factors are:

- **High blood pressure and high cholesterol**
- **Being overweight/obese**
- **Diabetes**
- **Family history of CVDs**
- **Excessive alcohol consumption**
- **Smoking**
- **Age – most common in people over 50**
- **Gender – men are more likely to develop CVD earlier than women**
- **Diet – an unhealthy diet can lead to high cholesterol and high blood pressure**

How Can I Protect Myself from Cardiovascular Disease?

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is key in reducing your risk of CVDs. There’s a lot you can do to protect your heart, so begin now by incorporating these small changes to your daily lives.

- **Exercise regularly**
- **Stop smoking. If you don’t smoke, then don’t start**
- **Avoid harmful use of alcohol**
- **Manage stress levels**
- **Maintain a healthy weight**
- **Eat more fruits, vegetables, lean meats, low-fat dairy and whole grain breads and cereals.**
- **Get screened regularly to know your four health numbers. Ask your doctor about your blood pressure, cholesterol, body mass index (BMI) and blood sugar levels.**
- **Reduce the amount of salt, unhealthy fats and added sugars in your diet.**

At the heart of it all, health policies that create environments conducive to making healthy food and lifestyle choices available and affordable are essential for motivating people to adopt and sustain healthy behaviours.

*Remember, there is nothing sweeter than a healthy lifestyle!*

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