Heart disease usually involves the formation of a fatty substance called plaque in the walls of the coronary arteries that supply blood to the heart. If the arteries become narrowed enough or blocked, the person may suffer a heart attack (death of a region of heart muscle tissue). Among the many factors that have been found to be related to the risk of developing heart disease are high blood pressure (or hypertension), a history of heart disease among one's close relatives (indicating a possible genetic predisposition to the disease), cigarette smoking, being relatively overweight, and a high level of a fatty substance called cholesterol in the blood. In addition to all of these well-established risk factors, it is now clear that stress can have a major impact on the development of heart disease. People who continually undergo a great deal of stress – and who lack the ability to control it – are at a significantly greater risk for heart disease than people who undergo less stress or who can manage stress successfully. Jobs that impose high psychological demands but that provide the worker with little control – such as a cook, waiter, and hospital orderly – seem to breed disease.

The Type A behavior pattern

While some jobs may make heavier psychological demands than others, certain sorts of people, regardless of their occupation, seem to make heavy psychological demands on themselves – and as a result, run a greater risk of heart disease. People with a particular personality style, called the coronary-prone behavior pattern and commonly labeled Type A, have been found to be especially susceptible to heart disease. Type A people are hard-driving, competitive, and aggressive. They experience great time urgency, always trying to do more and more in less and less time. People who have an opposite sort of personality are termed Type B. Others are categorized somewhere in between.

Many studies have confirmed that Type A people are more susceptible to heart disease than Type B people. One probable reason is that Type A people tend to make greater demands on themselves and to expose themselves to more stressful situations than do Type B people. One study of college football players found, for example, that Type A players were rated by their coaches as playing harder than Type B players when they were injured. Type A people also tend to have an unusually intense physiological reaction to the stress that they encounter. When they are faced with a challenging situation, they tend to manifest higher blood pressure and greater increases in heart rate

and in the level of epinephrine in their blood than Type B people. Some researchers believe that this greater physiological reactivity under stress – sometimes called hot reactivity – is the key to the link between the Type A pattern and heart disease.