

Heart Related Emergencies

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Angina

What is it?

Chest pain or discomfort caused by reduced blood flow to your heart muscle.

Symptoms:

It can be hard to tell the difference from angina and other types of chest pain, such as indigestion.

Angina can be stable or unstable.

- Stable angina is chest pain that usually occurs with activity and is relatively predictable. The chest pain tends to follow a pattern. In other words, there's been no change in how often you get the chest pain and how long it lasts.
- Unstable angina is chest pain that is sudden or new or changes from the typical pattern. It may be a sign of a future heart attack.

If your angina gets worse or changes, seek emergency medical help immediately.

Aortic Dissection

What is it?

A tear in the inner layer of the aorta, the large blood vessel branching off the heart. Blood rushes through this tear into the middle layer of the aorta, causing the inner and middle layers to separate (dissect).

Symptoms:

- Sudden severe chest or upper back pain, often described as a tearing, ripping or shearing sensation, that radiates to the neck or down the back
- Loss of consciousness (fainting)
- Shortness of breath
- Sudden difficulty speaking, loss of vision, weakness or paralysis of one side of your body, such as having a stroke
- Heavy sweating
- Weak pulse in one arm compared with the other

If you are having any of these signs or symptoms, they could be caused by an aortic dissection or another serious condition. Seek emergency medical help immediately.

Cardiac Arrest vs. Heart Attack

Heart attacks and cardiac arrest are not the same thing.

Heart Attack:

- Occurs when blood flow to part of the heart muscle is blocked by a clot.
- The longer the person with a heart attack goes without treatment, the greater the damage to the heart muscle.
- Occasionally, the damaged heart muscle triggers an abnormal rhythm that can lead to cardiac arrest.

Cardiac Arrest:

- Occurs due to an abnormal heart rhythm.
- The abnormal rhythm causes the heart to quiver so that it can no longer pump blood to the brain, lungs, and other organs.
- Within seconds, the person becomes unresponsive and is not breathing or is only gasping.
- Death occurs within minutes if the victim does not receive lifesaving treatment.

Chest Wall Pain

What is it?

A type of muscle pain in the chest.

Types of Chest Wall Pain:

- **Bruised chest muscles**

- from excessive coughing, straining or minor injury can cause harmless chest pain.

- **Costochondritis**

- causes pain and tenderness in and around the cartilage that connects your ribs to your breastbone (sternum).

If you have costochondritis, pressing on a few points along the edge of your breastbone often triggers considerable tenderness. If gently touching the area with your fingers causes chest pain, it's unlikely that a serious condition, such as a heart attack, is the cause of your chest pain.

Heart Attack

What is it?

A blockage of blood flow to the heart muscle due to a clot.

Symptoms:

A heart attack generally causes chest pain for more than 15 minutes. The pain may be mild or severe. Some heart attacks strike suddenly, but many people have warning signs hours or days in advance.

Someone having a heart attack may have any or all of the following:

- Chest pain, pressure or tightness, fullness, or a squeezing or aching sensation in the center of the chest
- Pain or discomfort that spreads to the shoulder, arm, back, neck, jaw, teeth, or stomach
- Nausea, indigestion, heartburn or abdominal pain
- Shortness of breath
- Lightheadedness, dizziness, fainting
- Cold sweat

Symptoms in Women:

Women often experience less obvious warning signs

- An uncomfortable feeling in the upper back, jaw, neck, or shoulder
- Shortness of breath

- Nausea or vomiting
- Pain or pressure in the lower chest or upper abdomen
- Fainting
- Indigestion
- Extreme fatigue

Plan of Action:

- **Call 911 or emergency medical assistance.** Don't ignore the symptoms of a heart attack. If you can't get an ambulance or emergency vehicle to come to you, have a neighbor or a friend drive you to the nearest hospital. Drive yourself only if you have no other option. Because your condition can worsen, driving yourself puts you and others at risk.
- **Chew aspirin.** Aspirin is a blood thinner. It prevents clotting and keeps blood flowing through a narrowed artery that's caused a heart attack. Don't take aspirin if you have chest pain due to an injury. Also, don't take aspirin if you are allergic to aspirin, have bleeding problems or take another blood-thinning medication, or if your health care provider previously told you not to do so.
- **Take nitroglycerin, if prescribed.** If you think you're having a heart attack and your health care provider has previously prescribed nitroglycerin for you, take it as directed. Don't take anyone else's nitroglycerin.
- **Begin CPR on the person having a heart attack.** The American Heart Association recommends starting hands-only CPR. Push hard and fast on the person's chest for 100 to 120 compressions a minute.
- **If an automated external defibrillator (AED)** is immediately available and the person is unconscious, follow the device instructions for using it

Pericarditis

What is it?

Swelling and irritation of the thin, saclike tissue surrounding your heart (pericardium).

Symptoms:

- Sharp chest pain that gets worse when you cough, lie down, or take a deep breath

Pericarditis is usually mild and goes away without treatment. If it's severe, you may need medication or, rarely, surgery.

It may be difficult to tell the difference between sudden (acute) pericarditis and pain due to a heart attack. If you have sudden, unexplained chest pain, seek emergency medical help.

Pneumonia with Pleurisy

What is it?

Inflammation of the membranes that surround the lung (pleura).

Symptoms:

- Chills
- Fever
- A cough that may produce bloody or foul-smelling sputum
- Chest pain when taking a breath or coughing

Unlike a true heart attack, pleurisy pain is usually relieved temporarily by holding your breath or putting pressure on the painful area of your chest.

If you've recently been diagnosed with pneumonia and then start having symptoms of pleurisy, contact your health care provider or seek immediate medical attention to determine the cause of your chest pain. Pleurisy alone isn't a medical emergency, but you shouldn't try to make the diagnosis yourself.

Pulmonary Embolism

What is it?

A blood clot in the lung.

It occurs when a clot, usually in the leg or pelvis, breaks free and gets stuck in a lung artery (pulmonary artery). The clot interrupts blood flow, making it more difficult for your lungs to provide oxygen to the rest of your body.

Symptoms:

- Sudden, sharp chest pain often with shortness of breath
- Sudden, unexplained shortness of breath, even without pain
- Cough that may produce blood-streaked spit
- Rapid heartbeat with shortness of breath
- Fainting
- Severe anxiety
- Unexplained sweating
- Swelling of one leg only, caused by a blood clot in the leg

Pulmonary embolism can be life-threatening. If you have symptoms of a pulmonary embolism, seek emergency medical help immediately.