

Education

Heart Attack: Brief Version

What is a heart attack?

A heart attack happens when blood flow to a part of your heart muscle is suddenly blocked.

Sometimes heart attacks happen when the heart needs more oxygen than the blood vessels can provide. This might happen, for example, during hard exercise such as shoveling snow.

The heart is a muscle like other muscles in your body. It needs oxygen, which it gets from the blood in blood vessels. The blood vessels that bring blood to the heart are called coronary arteries. A blood clot in one of these arteries can block the flow of blood to the heart muscle and cause the heart to stop working right. If the block lasts for many minutes, part of the heart can be injured.

The risk of a heart attack increases as you get older. Plaques (patches of cholesterol) may form in the arteries. This makes the arteries narrower inside. Blood clots may more easily form in a narrowed artery and block it.

Both men and women have heart attacks.

What are the symptoms?

You may:

- Feel pressure or pain in the middle of your chest.
- Feel pain in your shoulder, arm, abdomen, or jaw.
- Feel short of breath.
- Sweat.
- Have nausea.
- Feel weak or lightheaded.
- Look pale.

Women may have different symptoms than men. Women may have symptoms such as:

- A burning feeling in the upper stomach.
- An upset stomach.
- Sudden weakness or tiredness.

You can have a heart attack when you are resting or when you are exercising. You may think you just have an upset stomach. However, it's important to get medical help as soon as you can. Don't wait.

How is it diagnosed?

The health care provider checks you over. He or she will ask what you are feeling and about your medical history. You may have some tests to see how well your heart is working. You may have blood tests to see if there has been any heart damage.

How is it treated?

You may stay in the hospital about 2 to 6 days.

- Your health care provider will give you medicine to dissolve blood clots.
- You will probably be given other medicines to prevent damage to your heart.
- You may be in an intensive care unit.
- You may be given oxygen to make it easier for you to breathe.
- You may need to have an operation to open up or bypass the blocked area of the artery.

As you get better, your health care provider will help you work out a program to take care of yourself.

How can I take care of myself?

- Follow your health care provider's treatment plan.
- Eat healthy foods that are low in fat and salt.
- Keep your cholesterol at a normal level.
- Keep your blood pressure in a normal range.
- Lose weight if you need to. Stay at a healthy weight.
- Begin exercise when your health care provider tells you it's OK. Increase your exercise according to your provider's directions.
- Don't smoke.
- Carry your medicine with you. Learn how to take it. It will help to have a list of the names of each medicine and how much and when you should take it.
- Follow your health care provider's instructions for taking your medicines and having follow-up appointments.

Get specific instructions from your health care provider on how to take care of yourself when you have chest pain, including:

- What medicines you should take.
- When to call your health care provider.
- When to call 911.

Getting help right away when you are having a heart attack improves your chances of staying alive. It may also help keep your heart from being damaged.

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