

What is a Heart Attack?

Coronary arteries supply the heart muscle with blood and oxygen. When these arteries become blocked by plaque or blood clots, the heart muscle is oxygen and blood deprived which causes chest pain (angina) or a heart attack. Coronary artery disease (CAD) or atherosclerosis (plaque buildup in the arteries) can both contribute to a heart attack. Heart attacks are the leading killer of both men and women in the United States.

Symptoms

Here are the most common heart attack symptoms:

- Chest discomfort or pain. Uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness, or pain in the center of the chest that can be mild or strong. This discomfort or pain lasts more than a few minutes or goes away and comes back.
- Upper body discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach.
- Women may experience back pain and a deep throbbing in one or both arms.
- Women may experience edema (fluid retention and swelling), usually in the ankles and legs.
- Shortness of breath may occur with or before chest discomfort.
- Nausea, vomiting, light-headedness or fainting, or breaking out into a cold sweat.

Get Help Quickly

Acting fast at the first sign of heart attack symptoms can save a life and limit damage to the heart. Treatments are most effective when started within one hour of the beginning symptoms. Women and men may have different signs and symptoms of a heart attack. Women are more likely to experience abdominal pain, nausea, dizziness, and anxiety symptoms.

A heart attack is a life and death emergency. **Call 911 immediately** at the start of any of the above symptoms. Patients experience better outcomes when treatments are begun immediately. An ambulance should be used for transport to the hospital so that emergency medical personnel can begin treatment enroute. Traveling in a private car may delay treatment. While waiting for the ambulance, a regular aspirin may be taken to prevent blood clots.

Risk Factors

There are several risk factors for a heart attack, including smoking, diabetes, increasing age, high blood cholesterol, high blood pressure, family history, hardening of the arteries, lack of exercise, stress, and obesity.



What is a Heart Attack?, cont.



How to Avoid a Heart Attack

Taking action to control risk factors can prevent or delay a heart attack. Lifestyle changes and taking prescribed medications are important steps to prevention. Consider the following to reduce risk:

- **Quit smoking.** Your doctor can help you. (If you don't smoke, don't start!)
- **Eat a healthy diet.** Cut back on foods high in saturated fat and sodium (salt) to lower cholesterol and blood pressure. Include high-fiber whole grains, fruits, and vegetables in your diet.
- **Control your blood sugar if you have diabetes.**
- **Exercise.** Try to work up to at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise at least 4 times a week. ("Aerobic" means that your heart rate is raised during the exercise.)
- **Lose weight.** Your doctor can advise you about the best ways to lose weight.
- **Control your blood pressure.**
- **Talk to your doctor about taking aspirin.** Aspirin may help keep your blood from forming clots that can eventually block arteries.

For more information on heart attacks please visit:

http://www.medicinenet.com/heart_attack/article.htm

www.americanheart.org