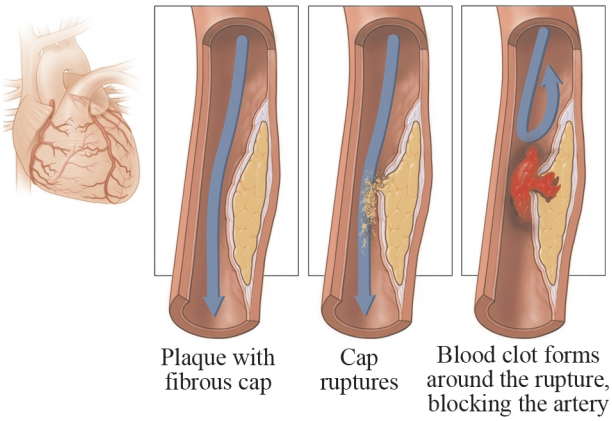
Heart Disease: Heart Attack



A heart attack (myocardial infarction) occurs when a blood clot blocks the flow of blood to the heart. If the heart does not get enough oxygen-rich blood, part of the heart dies.

Often a heart attack occurs because a plaque tears open. Plaque is a fatty buildup in the arteries. When a plaque tears, the body tries to fix the tear by forming a blood clot around it. The clot can block blood flow to the heart.

Know the symptoms

The most common symptom of a heart attack is **chest pain or pressure**. Some people describe it as discomfort, squeezing, or heaviness in the chest.

Many people also have at least one other symptom. For example, you may:

- Have pain or discomfort in your back, jaw, throat, upper belly, or arm.
- Sweat, feel sick to your stomach, or vomit.
- Have trouble breathing.
- Feel lightheaded or suddenly weak.
- Have a racing or fluttering heartbeat.

Symptoms may not be clear. If you think you might be having a heart attack, get help.

When to call for help

Call 911 if:

- You have symptoms of a heart attack. These may include:
  - Chest pain or pressure, or a strange feeling in the chest.
  - Sweating.
  - Shortness of breath.
  - Nausea or vomiting.
  - Pain, pressure, or a strange feeling in the back, neck, jaw, or upper belly or in one or both shoulders or arms.
  - Lightheadedness or sudden weakness.
  - A fast or irregular heartbeat.

  After you call 911, the operator may tell you to chew 1 adult-strength or 2 to 4 low-dose aspirin. Wait for an ambulance. Do not try to drive yourself.
- You have been diagnosed with angina, and you have chest pain that does not go away with rest or is not getting better within 5 minutes after you take a dose of nitroglycerin.

Never wait if you have symptoms of a heart attack. Even if you are not sure you are having a heart attack, call for help right away. Quick treatment could save your life.

What to expect after a heart attack

To help prevent another heart attack, you'll need to make lifestyle changes and take medicines.

Activity

- Increase your activities slowly, as directed by your doctor. Take short rest breaks when you get tired.
- Walking is an easy way to get exercise. Gradually increase the amount you walk. Talk to your doctor before you start to exercise.
- If your doctor has not set you up with a cardiac rehabilitation program, ask if it is right for you. Cardiac rehab includes supervised exercise, help with diet and lifestyle changes, and emotional support.
- Do not drive until your doctor says you can.
- You can have sex when you feel ready, as long as your doctor says it is okay. Often this means when you can easily walk or climb stairs.

Lifestyle changes

- Quit smoking, and avoid secondhand smoke.
- Eat a heart-healthy diet that is low in cholesterol, saturated fat, and salt, and high in fruits and vegetables. Ask your doctor or dietitian for details.
- Avoid getting sick from the flu. Get the flu vaccine every year.

Medicines

- Take your medicines exactly as prescribed. Call your doctor if you think you are having a problem with your medicine. You may need several medicines.
  - ACE inhibitors, beta-blockers, and statins can help prevent another heart attack.
  - Aspirin and other blood thinners help prevent blood clots. Blood clots can cause a heart attack or stroke.
- If your doctor has given you nitroglycerin, keep it with you at all times. If you have chest pain, sit down and rest, and take a dose of nitroglycerin as directed.
  - If chest pain gets worse or is not getting better within 5 minutes, **call 911** right away.
  - Do **not** take erection-enhancing medicines if you take nitroglycerin.
  - If your nitroglycerin pills get old, they may not work well. Get a new prescription if your supply is past the expiration date. Usually, you should replace your pills every 3 to 6 months.
- Be sure to tell your doctor about any chest pain or pressure you have had, even if it went away.
- Do not take over-the-counter drugs or herbal products without talking to your doctor first.

Mental health

- Discuss your feelings with your loved ones or a therapist. It is normal to feel scared, angry, hopeless, or guilty. Talking openly about your feelings can help you cope. If you think you are depressed, talk to your doctor.

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