

Understanding heart attack

A heart attack happens when blood flow to your heart is blocked. It's important to know the warning signs so you can get treatment quickly and help prevent damage to your heart.

What happens during a heart attack?

During a heart attack, also called a myocardial infarction, blood can't reach part of your heart, usually because of a blocked artery. This causes damage to your heart muscle because it doesn't get the oxygen and nutrients it needs. If left untreated, or if treatment is delayed, that lack of oxygen can weaken the heart muscle. In severe cases, heart attacks can lead to death.

What causes a heart attack?

Most often, a heart attack happens when plaque (made of fat, cholesterol, and other substances) builds up in the arteries. Over time, this buildup can crack or break open, called rupturing. When that happens, a blood clot can form and block blood flow to the heart.

Other causes can include:

- Spasms of a coronary artery (temporary tightening of the artery)
- Very high blood pressure
- A blood or air clot traveling from another place in the body that blocks a coronary artery
- A tear in a coronary artery, called a dissection, that blocks blood flow
- Certain medical conditions that affect the heart or blood vessels

What are the symptoms of a heart attack?

The major symptoms of heart attack are:

- A feeling of pressure, squeezing, fullness, or pain in the center or left side of the chest that lasts for more than a few minutes, or that goes away and comes back
- Feeling weak, lightheaded, or faint or breaking into a cold sweat
- Pain or discomfort in the jaw, neck, back, one or both arms, or shoulders
- Shortness of breath
- Severe fatigue or tiredness without a clear reason
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Indigestion that does not resolve with antacids



Not all of the above symptoms may be present during a heart attack. It is possible to have a heart attack without having any chest pain. These so-called "silent heart attacks" are more likely to occur in women and people with diabetes.

How is a heart attack diagnosed?

If you notice these symptoms in yourself or someone else, call 911 immediately. Do not drive yourself to the hospital, and do not drive someone you suspect is having a heart attack to the hospital. The sooner you get to an emergency room, the sooner you can get treatment to reduce the damage to the heart muscle.

At the hospital, health care professionals will diagnose a heart attack using a combination of physical exams and tests. These might include blood tests and imaging tests like an electrocardiogram (ECG or EKG) and coronary angiography.

How is a heart attack treated?

A heart attack is treated by quickly opening blocked arteries. Doctors may use medicine to break up clots or lower blood pressure. You may also need a procedure to restore blood flow, such as angioplasty or bypass surgery.

What does heart attack recovery look like?

After a heart attack, your body needs time to heal. Recovery often starts in the hospital, where doctors make sure your heart is stable and give medicines to prevent another heart attack. After going home, you may take medications and make healthy changes like eating well, exercising safely, and quitting smoking. A cardiac rehab program can also help support your recovery.

Preventing future heart attacks

You can lower your risk of a heart attack by:

- ✓ Eating heart-healthy foods
- ✓ Staying active
- ✓ Avoiding smoking or tobacco products
- ✓ Keeping blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar in a healthy range
- ✓ Taking medications as prescribed
- ✓ Managing stress and getting enough sleep



We are here to help

Your care team can help answer your questions about heart attacks and how to prevent them. Reach out for any support you need.