

Chest Pain: When Is It a Heart Attack?

Many people know that chest pain could signal a heart attack. But chest pain also can indicate other health problems. When should you worry?

Prolonged chest pain is considered the telltale symptom of a heart attack. But it's not always simple to tell when a heart attack occurs.

WHEN TO CALL

9-1-1

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Dr. Vlastaris said to call 911 if you have:

- sudden, crushing chest pain, tightness or heaviness
- pain radiating to your left arm, jaw or upper back
- pain accompanied by nausea, dizziness, sweating, palpitations or shortness of breath
- angina—diagnosed chest pain—worsening in severity, more frequent, lasting longer than usual or not responding to nitroglycerin
- sudden, sharp pain and shortness of breath—especially after you've been still for long periods such as a plane trip or bed rest.

CONDITIONS THAT CAN MIMIC A HEART ATTACK

Anthony Vlastaris, MD, FACC, a cardiologist at Fairview Hospital, indicated that chest pain may not signal heart trouble but may still warrant medical attention. If you have pain while coughing that lasts more than three to five days or if you are bringing up yellow-green phlegm and have a fever, call your doctor. In addition, several other conditions may cause chest pain that can feel like a heart attack, and could require a physician follow-up:

- Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). Referred to as chronic heartburn, GERD accounts for most non-heart-related chest pain. This burning chest pain tends to occur after meals and is often relieved with antacids. GERD is not usually related to exertion.
- Panic attacks. These usually last a few seconds to a few minutes. Besides chest pain, sufferers report shortness of breath, palpitations and a feeling of impending doom, which is unpredictable.
- Angina. The pain from this condition typically feels like a pressure or squeezing sensation in the chest, often traveling into the jaw, shoulders and arms. Angina chest pain typically occurs during physical or emotional stress, often in extreme temperatures or following a heavy meal. A drenching sweat or breathlessness may be a sign of angina.

IS IT A HEART ATTACK?

Most worrisome, chest pain can signal a life-threatening blockage of an artery on the surface of your heart. Without prompt treatment, lack of oxygen can cause portions of heart muscle to die, which is a heart attack. *"If chest pain is severe, prolonged or worsens with activity, call 911 immediately,"* said Dr. Vlastaris.

Heart attack risk heightens if heart disease runs in your family, if you smoke, are overweight or if you have high cholesterol, high blood pressure or diabetes. This applies no matter what your age. *"Don't think, 'I'm too young for a heart attack.' If you are experiencing warning signs, don't convince yourself it's nothing and be wrong,"* said Dr. Vlastaris.

For women and those with diabetes, classic chest pain may not be present during a heart attack. But sensations often mistaken for stomach trouble as well as extreme fatigue may be present prior to an attack.

WE'RE YOUR PARTNER IN HEART ATTACK CARE

Fortunately for patients brought to Fairview Hospital, rapid response heart teams using state-of-the-art cardiac catheterization equipment, blood tests and imaging devices quickly assess if a heart attack is occurring. *"Plus, these devices, particularly our new 64-slice CT scanner, can help us assess for other life-threatening conditions that can cause chest pain, such as a blood clot to the lung or a tear in the great artery coming off the heart, known as an aortic dissection,"* added Dr. Vlastaris. •

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Dr. Vlastaris is board certified in cardiovascular disease and internal medicine, and is a fellow of the American College of Cardiology. He received his medical degree at Case Reserve Western University, and underwent additional training at University Hospitals of Cleveland, and MetroHealth and Mt. Sinai hospitals. Special interests include echocardiography, stress testing and cardiac catheterization. For more information about Dr. Vlastaris or to schedule an appointment, please call our Medline Physician Referral Line at **1.866.733.6363**.