

# Dealing with Chest Pain

Having chest pain can be alarming because we often associate it with heart attacks. But in the vast majority of cases, chest pain is due to something else.

*“Common causes of chest pain can be something as simple as having indigestion or even a pulled muscle in the chest wall or can be something more serious of something going on in the lungs or the heart.”*

Sometimes chest pain results from inadequate blood flow to the heart muscle — a condition called angina.

Chest pain from angina may go away with rest but should be checked by your healthcare provider.

A heart attack often involves chest pain but it can come with other symptoms as well and are different for men and women.

Men often feel pain or pressure in the chest as well as pain in other areas such as the arms, back, neck, jaw and stomach; shortness of breath; nausea and vomiting; sweating; dizziness; while women often feel discomfort in the chest, but not necessarily chest pain along with shortness of breath; nausea; jaw or back pain; fatigue; insomnia; and anxiety.

If you think you might be having a heart attack, call 911 right away.

While waiting for the ambulance, chew a 325-milligram non-coated aspirin, if you don't have an allergy to aspirin.

*“With any kind of chest pain, it's important to have it checked out promptly to make sure it's not something serious.”*

During an exam for chest pain, health care providers will check your vital signs, including your blood pressure, temperature, and heart rate.

They'll also do an examination of your heart, lungs, chest muscles, and abdomen.

In addition, you'll be asked questions about the pain including

Where is it?

What does it feel like—for example pressure, tightness, squeezing, or burning?

Is it increasing or decreasing?

Did it start slowly, or come on suddenly?

Has it spread to other areas like your neck, shoulders, or arms?

Does it get worse with movement or exertion?

And do you have other symptoms?

You'll also be asked about medicines you take, any allergies you have, and activities that could have triggered the pain.

A test called an electrocardiogram may be done, in which electrodes are attached to the skin to measure your heart's electrical activity.

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Doctors may also order blood tests, chest x-rays, and CT scans to help find the cause of chest pain.

*“If tests suggest the pain is due to a serious problem like heart disease you may be admitted to the hospital for more testing and treatment.”*

If you're sent home, remain alert for any changes in your symptoms. Get immediate medical attention if the pain increases or spreads to other areas, if you develop a fever of 100.4 degrees or higher, or if you experience symptoms such as shortness of breath or swelling in one leg.

*“Patients should not panic if they have chest pain, but it is very important that you explain all of your symptoms to your provider so they can best evaluate and treat your chest pain.”*