

# Diagnosing a Heart Attack

Understanding how heart attacks are diagnosed can be reassuring, whether you are in a hospital or at home and experiencing symptoms.

*“They instantly took some blood. They also did an EKG, and then, they gave me another nitroglycerin pill, and then I was kind of left alone for maybe a few minutes. When they did come back, it was said that I was in the process, or I’ve had a heart attack.”*

When you are having a heart attack, blood flow to the heart is blocked.

A blocked artery prevents oxygen-rich blood from reaching a section of the heart. If the blocked artery is not reopened quickly, the part of the heart normally nourished by that artery begins to die.

If you think you are having a heart attack it’s important to call 911 immediately and get emergency help. Treatment will likely begin before your heart attack is diagnosed or you get to the hospital.

Early treatment might include chewing a non-coated, full strength aspirin, taking a nitroglycerin tablet under the tongue, or getting supplemental oxygen.

Oxygen can be delivered through a mask or a small tube under your nose called a cannula.

Whether you are taken to the hospital by ambulance or arrive some other way, treatment and diagnosing your heart attack will happen quickly.

You may be given treatments that can open up the blockage and return blood flow to the heart muscle, reducing the damage to your heart and possibly saving your life.

These medicines are sometimes called “clot busters,” or thrombolytic medicines. They can help by dissolving blood clots in your coronary arteries that block blood flow.

But they can only limit further damage to the heart. They can’t repair the damage that’s already done.

Speed is very important to limit the damage caused by your heart attack so these medicines may be given before you have many extensive tests to diagnose the heart attack.

After the emergency medicines and measures have been taken, your emergency care team will evaluate your heart and arteries.

To help with your diagnosis you may be given blood tests, an electrocardiogram, also known as an ECG, a cardiac catheterization, or other tests.

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Based on your results, your healthcare team may decide you need a procedure to open up the narrowed or blocked arteries.

Some of these procedures may include angioplasty and stenting, or in some cases, bypass surgery.

Whichever treatment you need, if you act quickly, your emergency care team can do what they do best – get you on the road to healing.

*“If you are having symptoms of a heart attack, which includes chest pain, chest squeezing, chest tightness, shortness of breath, excessive fatigue, or significant indigestion, you should call 9-1-1 immediately and seek medical attention.”*

While you are in the hospital, your healthcare team will monitor your heart for any signs of damage to the heart muscle. They will look for things like irregular heartbeats and symptoms of heart failure.

They will also provide you with information on what to expect during your recovery, medicines you need to take, lifestyle changes to follow in order to reduce the risk of another heart attack, and when to call your healthcare provider.