

HEART ATTACKS: SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

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These heart attack symptoms could mean the difference between life and death

A heart attack occurs when the blood flow that brings oxygen to the heart muscle is severely reduced or cut off entirely. This is because of the arteries, which are slowly narrowing due to a buildup of fat, cholesterol, and plaque. A good percentage of patients don't make it to A&E because they ignored their symptoms, Dr. David Fischman, co-director of the Cardiac Catheterization Laboratory at Thomas Jefferson University, says.

Chest discomfort

This is a very common sign of a heart attack, even though women are more likely to experience other typical signs, Dr. Fischman says. "Women have the same incidence as men but the symptoms presentation is different." The discomfort in the center of the chest usually lasts more than a few minutes, and can go away and come back. It can feel like uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain, the American Heart Association says.

Sore back or arms

This is referred pain, or reflective pain, Dr. Fischman says. It is perceived at a location other than the site of the cause. Blocked arteries prevent oxygenated blood from feeding that muscle, causing soreness and pain. "If you feel pain in your arms and move them without reproducing the symptoms or they get better, it's not likely a heart attack; but if the pain doesn't change, it may be the heart." Sudden heaviness or weakness, numbness, and pinching are warning signs, according to Harvard Medical School.

Indigestion

It is often confused for a heart attack but this should not stop you from going to A&E, especially if you are not prone to indigestion, Dr. Fischman says. Take antacids, which usually take effects within a few minutes and go to the ER if the pain discomfort did not go away, he adds. Either one can cause chest pain because the esophagus and heart are located near each other.

Breaking out in cold sweat

The heart is not pumping efficiently which causes your blood pressure to drop, leaving you in cold sweat. Pumping blood through blocked arteries makes the heart work much harder and the body sweats more in order to keep its temperature down during the extra effort. A study found that patients hospitalised for heart attack usually ignored the usual symptoms of heart attack, but if sweating occurred, they were less likely to delay treatment.

Shortness of breath

Shortness of breath, caused by fluid buildup in the lungs as wet lungs cannot exchange oxygen easily, with or without chest discomfort is another common symptom of having a heart attack; and it doesn't necessarily have to come along with other signs, Dr. Fischman says. "If you are sitting down and can't catch your breath, this is not normal." If you are 20 years old, you're probably just panicking; but if you are a middle-aged woman panting for seemingly no reason, see a doctor, he adds.

Acid reflux or reflux disease

They both cause a feeling of tension in the chest that can be mistaken for a heart attack, Dr. Fischman says. Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) is the chronic, more severe form of acid reflux. The indistinctness is due to the fact that the nerves in the stomach and heart don't clearly signal to the brain where the pain comes from. Studies even show that some popular heartburn drugs increase the risk of heart attack.

Very high blood pressure

This can cause chest discomfort that is similar to what you'd feel if you were having a heart attack, Dr. Fischman says. The moving blood pushes against the arterial walls, a force that is measured as blood pressure. Hypertension results from the tightening of very small arteries which constrict, causing the heart to work harder to pump blood through the smaller space, thus increasing the pressure inside the vessels, according to the Texas Heart Institute.

Shoulder and neck pain

This is an early warning sign of coronary disease, Dr. Fischman says. "It has to do with blood pathways." The diaphragm and nearby nerves can become exasperated causing pain to refer elsewhere. The pain can spread beyond the chest area to the neck and then expand to the shoulders. You may have upper body pain with no chest discomfort but this symptom is more common among women, he adds.

Jaw pain

Nerve fibres in the arm and jaw run together with the cardiac nerve fibres to the brain. It may mistake the true source of the pain and not recognise that it's coming from the heart, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This symptom is more common among women.

Heartburn

It is mistaken for a heart attack "all the time," Dr. Fischman says. "If this is a first occurrence and you never felt this before, you deserve to get it checked out." Heartburn can also be a symptom of GERD and acid reflux. Both heartburn and a developing heart attack can cause symptoms that subside after a while. Heartburn will include a burning sensation in the

upper abdomen moving up into the chest, according to Mayo Clinic, and is usually relieved by antacids.

Changes in ability to exercise

This is a sign that a heart attack is very likely to occur soon. “Discomfort that builds up over a day or two and doesn’t go away is a symptom,” Dr. Fischman says. If you are a runner but jogging a mile leaves you tired, and then panting and unable to catch your breath, you should seek medical attention.”

Chronic fatigue

Tiredness is a common symptom for almost every ailment in the book; many people dismiss it. However, unusual fatigue and sleeplessness might be early warning signs of a heart attack in women, according to a study. You may be feeling fatigues because the blood flow to the heart is reduced, due to reducing pumping ability, which puts a lot of pressure on the muscle.

Stomach pain

Pain, such as something heavy sitting on your stomach, and discomfort may spread downward into the abdominal area. This symptom is particularly likely in women, according to the American Heart Association. The pain may worsen with even minor activity.

Nausea and vomiting

A heart attack is the most severe cause of vomiting which is usually preceded by nausea. Some people have a feeling of being full or sick to the stomach even if they have eaten very little. This is due to a buildup of fluid around the liver and intestines interfering with digestion, according to the Heart Failure Association of the European Society of Cardiology.

Lightheadedness

A reduction of blood flow to the brain may leave you feeling faint, lightheaded or dizzy. It may be reduced because the heart cannot pump blood adequately because blood flow is blocked. Dizziness, especially when standing up quickly, is an extremely common symptom for people with heart failure