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The National Women's Health Information Center

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Frequently Asked Questions about Heart Attack

What is a heart attack?

A heart attack occurs when there is a severe blockage in an artery that carries oxygen-rich blood to the heart muscle. The blockage is usually caused by the buildup of plaque (deposits of fat-like substances, or *atherosclerosis*) along the walls of the arteries. The sudden lack of blood flow to the heart muscle deprives the heart of needed oxygen and nutrients. If the blockage is not opened quickly, the heart muscle is likely to suffer serious, permanent damage as areas of tissue die.

The medical term for a heart attack is *acute myocardial infarction*. Acute means sudden, *myo* refers to muscle, and *cardia* refers to heart. The *myocardium* is the medical name for the heart muscle. *Infarct* means that (heart) tissue has been destroyed or killed because of the clogging of the blood vessels that supply oxygen to the heart.

Do women have to worry about having a heart attack?

Heart disease – the cause of heart attack – is the #1 killer of both men and women in the United States. The onset of heart disease is later in women than men due to the protective effects of female hormones before menopause. Women are also more likely to have additional health conditions (such as diabetes and high blood pressure) that increase their risk for more heart attacks.

How can I tell if I am having a heart attack?

Every minute counts, even if the symptoms seem to disappear! Know that not everyone gets all of these warning signs. And, sometimes these signs can go away and return. Treatments are most effective if given within one hour of when the attack begins. If you have these symptoms, call 911 right away!

Signs of heart attack include:

- Chest discomfort or uncomfortable pressure, fullness, squeezing, or pain in the center of the chest that lasts longer than a few minutes, or comes and goes.
- Spreading pain to one or both arms, back, jaw, or stomach.
- Cold sweats and nausea

As with men, women's most common heart attack symptom is chest pain or discomfort. But women are somewhat more likely than men to have some of the other warning signs, particularly shortness of breath, nausea, vomiting and back or jaw pain.

Why is prompt treatment so important?

The longer you wait to get medical treatment, the greater the likelihood that you will have severe, permanent damage to your heart or even die. The earlier the treatment, the more likely it is that damage to your heart will be kept to a minimum. Remember, treatments are most effective if given within one hour of when the attack begins.

How is a heart attack diagnosed?

Heart attacks are most often diagnosed by health care providers in an emergency room. Some of the tests that can be done to tell if you have had or are having a heart attack include:

- Electrocardiogram (EKG or ECG) – checks the heart's rhythm and can locate the part of the heart where a heart attack might be occurring (or has occurred).
- Blood test – checks for substances in the blood called *biomarkers*, which may increase in amount in the blood if heart cells are injured.
- Echocardiogram (echo) – looks for problems with the heart's pumping action.
- Stress test – looks for blockages in blood vessels and problems with the heart.
- Cardiac catheterization – looks for problems with the blood vessels, heart chambers, heart valves, and heart birth defects.
- Nuclear imaging – looks for damaged areas of the heart and problems with the heart's pumping action.

How is a heart attack treated?

Once it is clear that a person is having a heart attack, immediate treatment usually includes drugs to help open the blocked artery, which restores blood flow to the heart muscle, and prevents clots from forming again.

If you suffer a heart attack and get to an emergency room quickly, a therapy called *reperfusion* might be done. The sooner you have any part of this therapy, the better your recovery will be. Reperfusion involves:

- Drugs to dissolve blood clots (*thrombolysis*).
- *Balloon angioplasty* or *percutaneous transluminal coronary angioplasty* (PTCA) to widen narrowed arteries with an inflated balloon.
- *Coronary artery bypass graft surgery* (CABG) to improve blood supply to parts of the heart muscle that suffer from decreased blood flow.

Cardiac rehabilitation programs are offered in most communities to help people recover from a heart attack and reduce the chances of having another attack.

If I have had one heart attack, will I have another one?

The odds of both women and men having a second heart attack are relatively high. That is why it is important to continue with medical follow-up treatment, participate in cardiac rehabilitation if possible, and make needed lifestyle changes (such as quitting smoking and starting an exercise program) to reduce the risk of another heart attack. If you had an unhealthy lifestyle before your heart attack, it is time to change your ways! Talk to your health care provider about diet, weight control, exercise, managing stress, and controlling your blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

Is it safe to have sex after a heart attack?

Most heart attack survivors are able to return to their usual sexual activities after recovering from their heart attack, just as they are able to return to other kinds of physical activity and to work. Be sure to talk to your health care provider about when you should resume sexual activity. It is normal to have fears about having another heart attack during sex, but this isn't likely to happen if you have recovered and are following your medical treatment plan.

Why is exercise so important after a heart attack?

Exercise is good for your heart muscle and overall health. It can help you lose weight, keep your cholesterol and blood pressure under control, reduce stress, and lift your mood. If you participate in a cardiac rehabilitation program, you will learn how to exercise safely and regularly to strengthen your heart and body. When exercising, you will need to watch out for signs of problems such as chest pain, shortness of breath, feeling dizzy or weak, irregular heartbeats, or cold sweats. If you develop these symptoms, stop exercising and call 911 for help right away.

How can I prevent a heart attack?

There are many things you can do to prevent heart disease and stay healthy. You probably already know what they are — not smoking, eating a heart healthy diet, getting plenty of regular exercise, keeping your weight under control, getting regular medical checkups, managing stress in your life, and controlling your blood pressure and cholesterol. It is also important for women to control other diseases they may have, such as diabetes and high blood pressure. Daily aspirin therapy or other medical treatment may be an option for you to help prevent heart disease and heart attack. Talk to your health care provider about your risks for heart disease, appropriate screening tests, and ask what steps you can take to improve your heart health.

For more information...

For more information on heart attacks, contact the National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC) at (800) 994-9662 or the following organizations:

Act in Time to Heart Attack Signs Campaign

National Heart Attack Alert Program
National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute
Internet Address: <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/actintime/>

The Heart Truth

National Awareness Campaign for Women about Heart Disease
National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute (NHLBI)
Phone Number(s): (800) 793-2665
Internet Address: <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/hearttruth/index.htm>

American Heart Association

Phone Number(s): (800) 793-2665
Internet Address: <http://www.americanheart.org/>

Texas Heart Institute

Phone Number(s): (800) 292-2221
Internet Address: <http://www.texasheartinstitute.org>

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