

# *Heart Attack Signs and Symptoms*



**Marshfield Clinic**



**MINISTRY HEALTH CARE**



*Two Leaders, One Leading Heart Care Team*

# Heart Attacks Signs and Symptoms

*A heart attack is a life-threatening emergency in which every second counts. The most important thing is to get to a hospital as soon as possible. Don't lose time trying to decide if you really are having one.*

***If you have symptoms,  
call 911 right away.***





*Heart attack is the leading killer of both men and women in the U.S. The key to survival is to recognize the signs and seek care immediately.*

## ***What Causes a Heart Attack?***

Most heart attacks occur as a result of coronary artery disease, which is the buildup of plaque on the inner walls of the coronary arteries. Eventually, a section of plaque can break open, causing a blood clot. A heart attack occurs if the clot becomes large enough to cut off most or all of the blood flow through the artery, preventing oxygen-rich blood from reaching the heart muscle. The lack of oxygen damages the heart muscle. If the blockage isn't treated quickly, the damaged heart muscle begins to die.

## ***Other Names for Heart Attack***

It can get confusing when you hear medical people refer to heart attack as other names. Some you may hear are:

- Myocardial infarction or MI
- Acute myocardial infarction or AMI
- Acute coronary syndrome or ACS
- Coronary thrombosis
- Coronary occlusion

## ***Early Treatment is Critical***

The main goal of early treatment for a heart attack is to prevent or significantly reduce the amount of damage to the heart muscle. Today, we are fortunate to have new medications and treatments to help that were not available in years past. For example, clot-busting drugs can stop some heart attacks in progress. But, to be effective, these drugs must be given relatively soon after heart attack symptoms appear.

## ***Call 911 Right Away***

If you or someone you are with has any of the signs or symptoms of a heart attack, call 911 right away. It is almost always the fastest way to get life-saving treatment. The emergency medical service staff can begin treatment when they arrive, which can be much sooner than if someone goes by car. If you do not have access to call 911, get someone to take you to the hospital right away. ***Do not drive yourself unless you have absolutely no other choice.***

## ***Heart Attack Warning Signs***

Some heart attacks are sudden and intense, but most heart attacks start slowly, with mild pain or discomfort. Often, people affected aren't sure what's wrong and wait too long before getting help.

### ***Most Common Signs***

- **Chest discomfort.** Most heart attacks involve discomfort in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes, or that goes away and comes back. It can feel like uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain.
- **Discomfort in other areas of the upper body.** Symptoms can include pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach.
- **Shortness of breath** with or without chest discomfort.

### **OTHER SIGNS**

- Breaking out in a cold sweat
  - Nausea
  - Lightheadedness or dizziness
  - Numbness of arms
- Unexplained anxiety, weakness or fatigue
  - Even if you're not sure it's a heart attack, have it checked out. Minutes matter and fast action can save lives – maybe your own. Don't wait more than five minutes to call 911 or your emergency response number.

### ***Heart Attack Signs Can Be Different for Women***

As with men, women's most common heart attack symptom is chest pain or discomfort. But women are somewhat more likely than men to experience some of the other common symptoms:

- Shortness of breath
- Nausea/vomiting
- Back or jaw pain



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The early signs of heart attacks in women are often overlooked. A study of 500 female heart attack patients found that most experienced these symptoms weeks before their heart attack:

- Unusual fatigue
- Sleep disturbances
- Shortness of breath
- Indigestion
- Anxiety

If you experience any of these symptoms, don't ignore them. Contact your doctor.

## ***Cardiac Arrest***

The heart stops beating during a cardiac arrest. If you are with someone who experiences a cardiac arrest, and have access to a phone, call 911 immediately, then start CPR. Use an AED (Automatic External Defibrillator) if one is available.



### ***Signs of Cardiac Arrest***

- Sudden loss of responsiveness - victim does not awaken or respond to firm tapping on his or her shoulders while you ask, "Are you all right?"
- No normal breathing - the victim does not take a normal breath when you tilt his or her head up and check for air movement for 5 seconds.

For more information on the Marshfield Clinic and Ministry Health Care heart care team, ask your health care provider or visit [www.oneheartcareteam.org](http://www.oneheartcareteam.org).

References: American Heart Association,  
National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute (NHLBI)  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

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