

Frequently Asked Questions And Answers – Heart Attack

The following are questions that may typically arise during a session regarding heart attack:

1. How would I know if I were having a heart attack?

It's not always easy to tell, but the pain is often described as pressure, tightness or heaviness. These are the symptoms: chest pain or discomfort, pain or discomfort in the jaw, neck or back, feeling weak, lightheaded or faint, pain or discomfort in the arms or shoulders, and/or shortness of breath. It may be only one or it may be several. When in doubt, do not wait, call 9-1-1 right away!

2. What is angina and how is it different from a heart attack?

Angina is NOT a heart attack. It is a recurring pain or discomfort in the chest that results from some part of the heart temporarily not getting enough blood. It may be more noticeable during physical exertion, such as snow shoveling, or climbing stairs, but is usually relieved within a few minutes by resting or taking prescribed medication. People who have angina are at greater risk of a heart attack than those who do not. What they need to keep in mind, is that angina pain lasts **less than 5 minutes**. Pain lasting 15 minutes or more is a sign of a heart attack. Whether you have angina or not, never wait longer than 5 minutes to call 9-1-1. If your doctor has told you that you have angina, and you notice a change in how your pain feels or when it comes (for example, if it comes when you are resting), call 9-1-1.

3. Do I have to have all of the heart attack signs before calling 9-1-1?

No! We have talked about the most common signs, and any one of them, or any combination of them is reason to call 9-1-1 immediately. Don't try to diagnose yourself or someone else - that is what medical professionals are there for. Your job is to call 9-1-1 right away so that you get the best care possible.

4. I'd rather wait until I'm sure something's really wrong. Why the hurry?

Clot-busting drugs and artery-opening treatments work best when given within the first hour after heart attack symptoms begin. The first hour is also the most risky time of a heart attack – it's when your heart may stop suddenly, so reacting quickly to symptoms really improves your chance of survival and recovery.

5. Exactly how quickly should I act?

Call 9-1-1 immediately. Never wait more than 5 minutes!

6. Why bother? There's not much I can do about it anyway, right?

There IS something you can do about a heart attack! Doctors can deliver drugs and perform procedures that can stop or reverse a heart attack, and/or limit the damage to the heart muscle, but only if you get to them quickly. Given that these new therapies are available, it is very unfortunate that many people are still not receiving them because they delay too long in seeking medical care. The greatest benefits are gained when the therapies are delivered early!

7. I don't want to cause a commotion. Can't I just have my spouse, friend, or coworker take me to the hospital?

Emergency Medical Personnel (also called EMS) bring medical care to you, such as oxygen and medications. They can contact the hospital before you get there so the hospital is ready for you. And they can actually restart someone's heart if it stops after they arrive – your spouse, friend or coworker cannot likely do that, nor can they help at all if they are tasked with driving to the hospital. In an ambulance, there are plenty of people to give you the help you need and get you to the hospital quickly.

8. I don't think I can remember all of this. How can I make it easier for me?

You can make a plan and discuss it with your family, friends, coworkers, and of course your doctor. Keep it simple – know the warning signs, and be sure that everyone knows that calling 9-1-1 is the quickest and best way to get you and/or your loved ones the help needed.

9. I carry nitroglycerin pills for my heart condition. If I have heart attack symptoms, shouldn't I try them first?

Yes, if your doctor has prescribed nitroglycerin pills, you should take them as your doctor has instructed you to. If your symptoms don't go away, call 9-1-1.

10. What about taking an aspirin like we see on TV?

You shouldn't delay calling 9-1-1 to take the aspirin. Sometimes people delay contacting emergency care because they think the symptoms will go away, and unfortunately precious time is wasted. If you have aspirin available, take one adult or two low-dose (children's) aspirin AFTER you call 9-1-1.