

# HEART ATTACK GUIDE

Heart attack occurs when the flow of blood to the heart is blocked, often by buildup of fat, cholesterol and other substances that form a hard deposit called plaque in a heart (coronary) artery. The interrupted blood flow can damage or destroy part or the heart muscle.



## THE CAUSES

**AGE.** Men age 45 or older and women age 55 or older.

**TOBACCO.** Smoking and long-term exposure to secondhand smoke.

**HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE.** Over time, this can damage arteries that feed your heart.

**HIGH LDL, OR TRIGLYCERIDE LEVELS.** A high level of "bad" cholesterol and triglycerides (a type of blood fat related to your diet) also ups your risk.

**DIABETES.** Not producing enough insulin or not responding to insulin properly causes your body's blood sugar levels to rise and increases your risk of a heart attack.

**FAMILY HISTORY.** Take cautions if your siblings, parents or grandparents have had early heart attacks (by age 55 for male relatives and by age 65 for female relatives).

**INACTIVITY.** An inactive lifestyle can increase your risk.

**OBESITY.** Obesity is associated with high blood cholesterol levels, triglyceride levels, blood pressure, also diabetes.

**STRESS.** You may respond to stress in ways that can increase your risk of a heart attack.

**ILLEGAL DRUG USE.** Using stimulant drugs can trigger a spasm of your coronary arteries.

## SYMPTOM CHECKER

- Pressure, tightness, pain, or a squeezing or aching sensation in your chest or arms
- Nausea, indigestion, heartburn or abdominal pain
- Shortness of breath
- Cold sweat
- Fatigue
- Lightheadedness or sudden dizziness

Some heart attacks strike suddenly, but many people have warning signs and symptoms hours, days or weeks in advance. The earliest warning may be recurrent chest pain (angina) that's triggered by exertion and relieved by rest. Angina is caused by a temporary decrease in blood flow to the heart.

## WHAT TESTS TO EXPECT

### ELECTROCARDIOGRAM (ECG)

It records the electrical activity of your heart via electrodes attached to your skin. Because injured heart muscle doesn't conduct electrical impulses normally, the ECG may show that a heart attack has occurred or is in progress.

### BLOOD TESTS

Certain heart enzymes slowly leak out into your blood if your heart has been damaged by a heart attack. Doctors will take samples of your blood to test for the presence of these enzymes.

You may also undergo some additional tests.

## TREATMENTS

With each passing minute after a heart attack, more heart tissue loses oxygen and deteriorates or dies. The main way to prevent heart damage is to restore blood flow quickly.

### Medications

- **ASPIRIN.** It reduces blood clotting, thus helping maintain blood flow through a narrowed artery.
- **THROMBOLYTICS.** Also called clotbusters, help dissolve a blood clot that's blocking blood flow to your heart.
- **ANTIPLATELET AGENTS.** They help prevent new clots and keep existing clots from getting larger.
- **NITROGLYCERIN.** Used to treat chest pain and improve blood flow to the heart by widening the blood vessels.
- **BETA BLOCKERS.** This helps relax your heart muscle, slow your heartbeat and decrease blood pressure.
- **ACE INHIBITORS.** These drugs lower blood pressure and reduce stress on the heart.

### Medical procedures

- **CORONARY ANGIOPLASTY AND STENTING.** Doctors insert a long, thin tube (catheter) that's passed through an artery, usually in your leg or groin, to a blocked artery in your heart. If you've had a heart attack, this procedure is often done immediately after a cardiac catheterization, a procedure used to locate blockages.
- **CORONARY ARTERY BYPASS SURGERY.** Occasionally, doctors may perform emergency bypass surgery at the time of a heart attack. Or you may undergo bypass surgery after your heart has had time to recover from a heart attack. Bypass surgery involves sewing veins or arteries in place around a blocked or narrowed coronary artery, allowing blood to bypass the narrowed section as it flows to the heart.

