

Chest pain

Emergency Department factsheets

What is chest pain?

Chest pain may come from many parts of the chest, including:

- the heart
- the lungs
- the oesophagus (food pipe)
- muscles
- bones (ribs and breastbone)
- the abdomen
- the skin.

What causes chest pain?

There are several common causes of chest pain.

- Indigestion or reflux (stomach acid coming up the oesophagus) can feel like a burning pain in the chest. This common problem can be made worse by smoking, alcohol, coffee, fatty foods and some medications. It often goes away quickly with antacid medication or milk.
- Muscle strains and inflammation in the spaces between the ribs, near the breastbone (costochondritis).
- Coughing such as with pleurisy (inflammation of the tissue lining the lungs), bronchitis and other types of chest infections.
- Cardiac chest pain may be caused by either Angina or heart attack. Angina is caused by poor blood flow to the heart and usually occurs when the heart has to work harder than usual. Heart attack is caused by a blockage in the coronary (heart) arteries. Chest pain that lasts more than ten minutes at rest, needs to be promptly investigated by a doctor.

Investigations

During your time in the emergency department, you have been assessed for the most serious causes of chest pain. These tests have shown

that you are not having a heart attack, or any other serious condition which may cause chest pain. The tests you have had to rule out serious causes may have included:

- An ECG (electrocardiogram): A test used to get a 'picture' of the electrical activity within the heart.
- Blood tests: To measure markers from the heart (cardiac enzymes) and other organs.
- A chest x-ray: To look at the lungs, heart and major blood vessels in the chest.

Additional heart tests may be arranged for you as an outpatient and you may be referred to a Cardiologist (heart doctor). Even if you are feeling well, make an appointment to follow-up with your doctor as soon as possible.

Ways to reduce your risk of a heart attack

Your chance of having a heart attack is increased by smoking, lack of exercise, high blood pressure, obesity, high cholesterol, diabetes, and a family history of heart disease.

The risk is higher in men and increases as you get older. It is important to remember that people without risk factors can also have heart disease.

There are several measures that can reduce your risk of heart attack.

- Stop smoking: Call Quitline for help and support.
- Exercise: Engage in moderate physical activity for 30 minutes or more, five days a week. A brisk walk is a good way to start.
- Eat a balanced diet (low in processed foods) including fish, cereals, grains, fruit and vegetables. Look for the Heart Foundation tick when choosing certain foods.
- Maintain a healthy weight.

- Take all prescribed medications as directed. Do not stop your medication unless advised by your doctor.
- Regular check-ups with your local doctor.

What are the symptoms of a heart attack?

Symptoms vary from person to person and often last 10 – 15 minutes or more. Some people may only have one or a few symptoms.

- A severe crushing pain in the centre of your chest or behind the breastbone.
- A squeezing, tightening, choking or heavy pressure in the chest.
- Pain that spreads to the shoulders and arms, hand, neck, throat and jaw.
- Sweating and being pale in colour.
- Feeling anxious, dizzy or unwell.
- A sick feeling in the stomach (nausea or vomiting).
- Being short of breath.

If you develop these symptoms, call an ambulance (dial 000), then:

- stop and rest quietly by sitting or lying down.
- have half an aspirin straight away (unless your doctor has told you to avoid them).

Do not attempt to drive yourself (or have someone else drive you) to hospital. Wait for an ambulance – it has specialised staff and equipment that may save your life.

With a heart attack, every minute counts. Do not wait. The faster a person gets treatment, the better.

If you have any doubt about your chest pain, call an ambulance (000).

Seeking help

In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000). For other medical problems see your local doctor or health-care professional.

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider

Want to know more?

National Heart Foundation

Phone 1300 36 27 87

www.heartfoundation.com.au

Quit for help to stop smoking

Phone 13 QUIT (13 78 48)

www.quit.org.au

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