Heart attack

Summary

- A heart attack is an emergency. If you experience the warning signs of heart attack, get help fast. Call triple zero (000) for an ambulance and chew 300mg aspirin, unless you have an allergy to aspirin or your doctor has told you not to take it
- Warning signs for heart attack differ from person to person.
- No two heart attacks are the same.
- Knowing the warning signs of heart attack and acting quickly can reduce the damage to your heart muscle and increase your chance of survival.

To perform its duties, the heart muscle needs a generous supply of oxygen and nutrients, which it receives from blood pumped through the coronary arteries and their branches. A heart attack occurs when a blood clot blocks one or more of the arteries that supply blood to the heart muscle. The medical term for a heart attack is acute myocardial infarction (AMI).

The most common underlying cause of a heart attack is cardiovascular disease (CVD). CVD occurs when fatty deposits (called plaque or atheroma) slowly build up on the inner wall of the coronary arteries and cause the arteries to become narrow.

If a blood clot forms in a narrowed artery and completely blocks the blood supply to a part of your heart, it can cause a heart attack. The severity of the heart attack depends on how much heart muscle is permanently damaged.

Heart attack is a medical emergency

Call triple zero (000) for an ambulance if you or someone you are with experiences the warning signs of heart attack.

It’s important to call triple zero, because:

- The trained operator will decide if you need an ambulance.
- You will receive treatment as soon as you phone.
- You will receive advice on what to do while waiting for the ambulance to arrive.

Ambulance paramedics are trained to use special lifesaving equipment and to start early treatments for heart attack inside the ambulance. Early treatment can reduce the damage to your heart.

The ambulance is the safest and fastest way to get you to hospital. It gets you medical attention straight away. Attempting to drive to hospital in a private vehicle can be dangerous for the occupants of your vehicle and other road users.

It is always better to go to hospital and be told it’s not a heart attack than to stay at home until it is too late.

Warning signs of heart attack

When having a heart attack you may experience pain, pressure, heaviness or tightness in one or more parts of your upper body, including your:

- chest
- shoulder(s)
- neck
- arm(s)
This may occur in combination with other symptoms. For example, you may also:

- feel nauseous
- feel dizzy or light-headed
- have a cold sweat
- feel short of breath.

**Warning signs of heart attack** vary from person to person and they may not always be sudden or severe. Although chest pain or discomfort is the most common symptom of a heart attack, some people will not experience chest pain at all, while others will experience only mild chest pain or discomfort.

You may have just one of these symptoms or you may have a combination of them. Symptoms can come on suddenly or develop over minutes and get progressively worse. Symptoms usually last for at least 10 minutes.

**If you have warning signs of heart attack that are severe, get worse quickly or last more than 10 minutes, call triple zero (000) immediately and ask for an ambulance.**

Chew 300mg aspirin unless your doctor has told you not to take it.

**Heart attack action plan**

Learning the warning signs and following an action plan gives you the best chance of surviving your heart attack. You can download a [free heart attack action plan (available in 17 languages)](http://betterhealth.vic.gov.au). 

**Diagnosis of a heart attack**

Tests to help diagnose a heart attack include:

- a blood test to measure levels of substances released into the blood when the heart muscle is damaged
- **coronary angiogram** (or cardiac catheterisation) a special x-ray of your coronary arteries
- **electrocardiogram (ECG)** a reading of the heart’s electrical impulses.

**Treatment for a heart attack**

Treatments for a heart attack may include:

- medicines to dissolve a blood clot that is blocking a coronary artery
- angioplasty and stent implantation – a procedure to open up a blocked coronary artery using a balloon at the point of narrowing. Once the artery is open, a special expandable metal tube (stent) is left in place to keep it open, and the balloon is withdrawn
- bypass surgery – an operation in which blood flow is redirected around a narrowed area in one or more of your coronary arteries. It is also called coronary artery bypass graft surgery (often shortened to CABG)
- long-term use of medicines – to lower the risk of heart attack or death in the future. Be advised by your doctor. Medicines may include: a small regular dose of aspirin and an additional blood thinning medication (clopidogrel, ticagrelor, or prasugrel), a statin (to stabilise the fatty deposits in the arteries) and a beta-blocker.

**Risk factors for cardiovascular disease (CVD)**

You can reduce your risk of developing CVD and having a heart attack by removing or reducing risk factors. These include:

- unhealthy eating
- being overweight or obese
- being physically inactive
- smoking – either being a smoker or inhaling other people’s smoke (passive smoking)
- having high cholesterol
- having high blood pressure
having diabetes
having depression, being socially isolated or not having quality social support.

Other factors that can increase the risk of developing CVD include:

- getting older
- being male
- having a family history of early death from CVD, such as a first-degree relative younger than 60
- being a post-menopausal woman.

**Changing your lifestyle can reduce your risk of heart attack**

Addressing the lifestyle factors that contribute to CVD can help reduce your risk of heart attack. Things you can do include:

- take medicines as prescribed
- eat a **variety of foods** from the five food groups, and limit sugary, fatty and salty take-away meals and snacks
- include vegetables, wholegrains, fruit, nuts and seeds every day
- choose healthier **fats and oils** such as olive or canola oil, nuts, seeds, fish and avocado
- use herbs and spices for flavour instead of salt
- avoid adding salt to food. Choose ‘no added salt’, ‘low-salt’ or ‘salt-reduced’ foods where possible
- drink mainly water

**stop smoking** and avoid **exposure to second-hand tobacco smoke**

- be physically active most days of the week
- manage your **blood pressure**
- manage your **cholesterol**
- achieve and maintain a healthy weight
- limit your alcohol consumption.
- develop good social support networks and **join groups**.

**Where to get help**

- In an emergency, call triple zero (000)
- Your doctor or health professional
- **Heart Foundation Helpline** Tel. 13 11 12