

Chest pain

What is chest pain?

Chest pain is any pain that is felt in the chest.

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

- the heart
- the lungs
- the *oesophagus* (food pipe)
- muscles
- bones – including your ribs and *sternum* (breastbone)
- the abdomen – the pain is referred to the chest due to a complex network of nerves
- skin.

All chest pain is considered to be heart-related until proven otherwise.

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*).
- **Shingles** (*herpes zoster*) can cause chest pain before a skin rash develops.
- **Coughing** such as with pleurisy (inflammation of the tissue lining the lungs), bronchitis and other types of chest infections.

Angina is caused by poor blood flow to the heart and usually occurs when the heart has to work harder than usual. Many people with *coronary artery disease* (or blocked heart blood vessels) experience angina. This often happens with exercise, high emotion or distress, cold weather or after eating a large meal. The pain is short-lived and eases when you rest. Angina does not cause damage to the heart but, if untreated, may lead to a heart attack.

Chest pain can also be due to a sudden blockage in the *coronary* (heart) arteries, causing a heart attack.

Many Australians die of a heart attack because they do not know the signs or wait too long to act.

Chest pain that lasts more than ten minutes (at rest) needs to be promptly investigated by a doctor.

New treatments for heart attack can save lives and prevent serious heart damage.

Treatment

Before treatment can begin, the cause of the pain must be found. There is a range of tests and treatments you may need while in the emergency department.

- **Bed rest** – to reduce the heart's workload.
- **Oxygen therapy** to reduce the stress on the heart and supplement the blood with oxygen.
- An **ECG** (*electrocardiogram*) – a test used to get a 'picture' of the electrical activity within the heart. It is quick and painless.
- **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.
- **Medication** – to relieve pain and dilate (widen) the blood vessels to allow the blood to flow more effectively, which may be given *intravenously* (through a 'drip' inserted into a vein).

If angina is suspected, further tests may be needed to check the blood vessels that supply the heart, such as an *angiogram*. Your doctor will advise you if this is needed.

An *exercise stress test* (on a special bicycle or a treadmill) may be arranged for you as an outpatient. You may be referred to a *Cardiologist* (heart doctor) for more tests.

Home care

In the first few days at home, try to take it easy. Rest if you feel tired. Slowly increase your activity as you are able. If you feel well, there is no need to limit work or strenuous activity (including sex).

What to expect

It is not always easy to diagnose the cause of chest pain, however your doctor will have ruled out any serious causes. Your local doctor will need to see you for a follow-up check and further tests may be needed. Even if you are feeling well, make an appointment to follow-up with your doctor in the next day or two.

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.



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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 diet low in fat** – including fish, cereals, grains, fruit and vegetables. Look for the *Heart Foundation tick* when choosing certain foods.
- **Maintain a healthy weight** – see your local doctor.
- **Regular check-ups** – with your local doctor. Take all prescribed medications as directed. Do not stop your medication unless advised by your doctor.

What are the symptoms of a heart attack?

- 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.

The symptoms often last ten to 15 minutes or more. Symptoms vary from person to person. Some people have few symptoms or none at all.

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 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.

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.



For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call **NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day** on **1300 60 60 24** for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to **interpreting services** for callers not confident with English. Call **1300 60 60 24**.

*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate



Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional.
- Visit the **Better Health Channel**
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- Contact the **National Heart Foundation**
Phone 1300 36 27 87
www.heartfoundation.com.au
- Contact **Quit**
Phone Quitline on 131 848
www.quit.org.au

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