



## Heart Attack Education

### *American Heart Month*

Your heart muscle needs oxygen to survive. A coronary attack (heart attack) occurs when the blood flow that brings oxygen to the heart muscle is severely reduced or cut off completely. This happens because coronary arteries that supply the heart with blood can slowly become thicker and harder from a buildup of fat, cholesterol and other substances that together are called plaque. This slow process is known as atherosclerosis. When a plaque in a heart artery breaks, a blood clot forms around the plaque. This blood clot can block the artery and shut off blood flow to the heart muscle. When the heart muscle is starved for oxygen and nutrients, it is called ischemia. When damage or death of part of the heart muscle occurs as a result of ischemia, it is called a heart attack or myocardial infarction (MI). About every 34 seconds, someone in the United States has a myocardial infarction (heart attack).



#### ***Is all chest pain a heart attack?***

No. One very common type of chest pain is called angina. It's a recurring discomfort that usually lasts only a few minutes. Angina occurs when your heart muscle doesn't get the blood supply and oxygen that it needs. The difference between angina and a heart attack is that angina attacks don't permanently damage the heart muscle. Often angina occurs during exercise or emotional stress when your heart rate and blood pressure increase and your heart muscle needs more oxygen.

#### ***What are the warning signs of a heart attack?***

Some heart attacks are sudden and intense, but most heart attacks start slowly, with mild pain or discomfort. Often people affected aren't sure what's wrong and wait too long before getting help. Here are signs that can mean a heart attack is happening:

- Chest discomfort. Most heart attacks involve discomfort in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes, or that goes away and comes back. It can feel like uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain.
- Discomfort in other areas of the upper body. Symptoms can include pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach.
- Shortness of breath with or without chest discomfort.
- Other signs may include breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea or light-headedness.

As with men, women's most common heart attack symptom is chest pain or discomfort. But women are somewhat more likely than men to experience some of the other common symptoms, particularly shortness of breath, nausea/vomiting, and back or jaw pain.

The American Heart Association recommends that heart attack prevention begin by age 20. This means assessing your risk factors and working to keep them low. For those over 40, or those with multiple risk factors, it's important to calculate the risk of developing cardiovascular disease in the next 10 years. Many first-ever heart attacks or strokes are fatal or disabling, so prevention is critical. The sooner you begin comprehensive risk reduction, the longer and stronger your heart will beat.

Learn the signs, but remember this: Even if you're not sure it's a heart attack, have it checked out (tell a doctor about your symptoms). Minutes matter! Fast action can save lives — maybe your own.