



Cardiac Conditions

Fact:

Sudden death can be the first sign of cardiac disease.

Fiction:

It's a myth that sharp chest pain always signals a heart attack.

Prevention:

A healthy lifestyle can prevent many heart problems.

Treatment:

Treatment may include lifestyle changes, medication and surgery.

To live, the heart must beat successfully. Cardiac conditions disrupt this critical process.

Understanding Cardiac Conditions

The most common cardiac conditions include:

- **Cardiac arrhythmias.** The normal adult heart beats 60 to 80 times per minute. If you have an arrhythmia, your heart beats slower, faster or irregularly. In the most dangerous arrhythmia, called ventricular fibrillation, the heart ventricles quiver and produce no real heartbeat. Unconsciousness, brain damage and death follow quickly.
- **Atrial fibrillation.** With this condition, a rapid, irregular heartbeat does a poor job of pumping blood out of the heart.
- **Bradycardia.** A very low heart rate can be normal for people in excellent physical condition, or can be a form of cardiac arrhythmia.
- **Cardiomyopathy.** With cardiomyopathy, changes in the heart muscle prevent normal contractions.

Other conditions that greatly tax the heart include having high cholesterol, diabetes and liver disease.

Who Has Cardiac Conditions?

Cardiac conditions can lead to heart attacks, which kill half a million Americans each year.

The following factors may increase the risk of cardiac disease:

- Increased age
- Family history of heart problems
- Personal history of coronary artery disease, rheumatic fever or thyroid disorders
- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Excess or low thyroid hormones
- Severe liver disease

Symptoms of Cardiac Conditions

Symptoms of cardiac conditions include dizziness, fainting and extreme fatigue; palpitations, low blood pressure, chest pain; and a slow, fast, irregular or missing

pulse. The legs and feet may also swell.

When It's an Emergency

A heart attack requires immediate emergency treatment. Symptoms include:

- Shortness of breath
- Sweating
- Pain or pressure in your chest, face, arms, neck or back; these symptoms can mean angina, or lack of oxygen to the heart
- Dizziness
- Nausea and vomiting

These symptoms may continue to:

- Lack of pulse
- Lack of breathing
- Unconsciousness
- Death

Don't try to work through these symptoms. If you have a heart condition and your doctor has prescribed a medication such as nitroglycerine, follow your doctor's directions and take it. If you don't respond to the medication within 15 minutes, or if you become lightheaded or have palpitations, seek emergency care.**

Do not drive yourself to treatment if you suspect you are having a heart attack.

If available, electrical cardioversion must be used as soon as possible. If not, cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) should be started.

False Alarms

Several conditions can mimic a heart attack. These include:

- Chest wall pain. If poking the chest intensifies the pain, it's probably not a heart attack. Viruses and muscle strain can cause this pain. Chest wall pain can be treated with aspirin for adults and ibuprofen or acetaminophen for children, along with low and intermittent heat.
- Heartburn. Burning or discomfort in the upper abdomen and under the breastbone may be accompanied by an acidic or sour taste in the mouth. Belching or taking an antacid may help.
- A precordial catch. Generally striking young adults, this condition causes a brief, sharp catch under the left breast that makes breathing difficult. Apparently harmless, this condition has no known cause.

Prevention and Treatment

Prevention includes:

- A heart-healthy diet where you emphasize vegetables, fruits, fish and plant sources and avoid saturated and trans fats
- Controlling cholesterol and high blood pressure
- Quitting smoking
- Controlling your weight
- Regular exercise

Be careful with electricity, especially around water, and don't go out in electrical storms. Electric shock can cause heart failure.

As treatment, a doctor may:

- Perform an electrocardiogram (EKG) or a portable one may be worn
- Do cardiac catheterization, in which a surgeon inserts a small tube through a blood vessel in an arm or leg. A tube may be inserted into the heart to see how it is working, or even may be used to carry tiny tools to make

surgical repairs.

- Inject a dye to assist in observations

Forms of treatment depend on the type of problem, and include:*

- Massaging a sinus in the neck
- Medications
- Surgery
- Pacemakers
- Defibrillation—giving the heart a measured electrical shock
- Angioplasty
- Coronary artery bypass surgery

If you are being tested or treated and have allergies or other medical conditions, or you may be pregnant, be sure to let your care providers know. If you think you are having a heart attack, don't drive yourself to treatment.

* IntelliHealth

** Mayo Clinic

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