

# What You Need to Know About Chest Pain

**D**id you know that anxiety and panic disorders can cause chest pain that is similar to a heart attack?

When you feel pain or discomfort in your chest, it is hard to know what to do. Are you having a heart attack? Or is it anxiety? Perhaps just indigestion? Regardless of the cause, if you have chest pain, it is important to seek medical help as soon as possible.

## What causes chest pain?

Chest pain has many possible causes. Some are serious, such as a heart attack. Some are not as serious, such as anxiety or indigestion. If you are at low risk for heart disease, the possibility of heart disease should not be ignored, but other causes for the pain are likely and should be investigated.

## How can you tell the difference?

It is difficult to tell the difference between cardiac (heart disease) chest pain and noncardiac chest pain. Both can produce symptoms of shortness of breath, palpitations, fast heart rate, heart flutter, nausea, and lightheadedness. Keep in mind that chest pain may not be the main symptom of a heart attack.

Here are some of the differences between heart disease pain and other types of chest pain:

- Heart disease pain feels more like discomfort. It may feel like squeezing, pressure, burning, or heaviness. Chest pain that is not caused by heart disease usually feels like sharp pain.
- Pain from heart disease is usually not felt in a specific spot. Chest pain that is not caused by heart disease is usually confined to one place that you can point to.
- Pain from heart disease usually comes on gradually and gets worse. Noncardiac chest pain usually begins suddenly, feels worse at the beginning, and doesn't last more than 30 minutes.
- If the pain starts during an activity and gets worse with exertion, it could be heart disease.
- If eating food or going outside relieves the pain, it is more likely to be noncardiac in origin.
- If your pain is affected by taking a deep breath or by pressing on the area of discomfort, it is most likely noncardiac in origin. Pain from heart disease usually stays the same.



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## Do you have heart disease or not?

If you have chest pain, your doctor will most likely give you cardiac diagnostic tests. If the tests show you don't have heart disease, another cause of the chest pain will be considered. A diagnosis of anxiety, depression, or gastrointestinal illness is then usually made.

Most often, chest pain without heart disease means you have an anxiety disorder. Women who don't have heart disease but who have symptoms such as palpitations, heart flutter, or shortness of breath are more likely to have anxiety.

## Remember to play it safe

The best action for anyone with chest pain is to seek help immediately. Even if it turns out not to be a heart attack, that is still the safest thing to do. Call 911; do not drive yourself or have someone drive you anywhere. Wait for the emergency workers to come to you.