

## **Heart Attack: Warning Signs and Tips on Prevention**

### **What is a heart attack?**

A heart attack (also called myocardial infarction) is when part of the heart muscle is damaged or dies because it isn't receiving oxygen. Oxygen is carried to the heart by the arteries (blood vessels). Most heart attacks are caused by a blockage in these arteries. Usually the blockage is caused by atherosclerosis, the buildup of fatty deposits (called plaque) inside the artery. This buildup is like the gunk that builds up in a drainpipe and slows down the flow of water.

Heart attacks can also be caused by a blood clot that gets stuck in a narrow part of an artery to the heart. Clots are more likely to form where atherosclerosis has made an artery more narrow.

### **Risk factors for a heart attack**

- Smoking
- Diabetes
- High cholesterol level
- High blood pressure
- Family history of heart attack
- Atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries)
- Lack of exercise
- Obesity
- Male sex
- Women after menopause not receiving estrogen replacement therapy

### **How do I know if I'm having a heart attack? What are the warning signs?**

The pain of a heart attack can feel like bad heartburn. You may also be having a heart attack if you:

- Feel a pressure or crushing pain in your chest, sometimes with sweating, nausea or vomiting
- Feel pain that extends from your chest into the jaw, left arm or left shoulder
- Feel tightness in your chest
- Have shortness of breath for more than a couple of seconds

Don't ignore the pain or discomfort. If you think you are having heart problems or a heart attack, get help immediately. The sooner you get treatment, the greater the chance that the doctors can prevent further damage to the heart muscle.

### **How can I avoid having a heart attack?**

Talk to your family doctor about your specific risk factors (see risk factors above) for a heart attack and how to reduce your risk. Your doctor may tell you to do the following:

- Quit smoking. Your doctor can help you. (If you don't smoke, don't start!)
- Eat a healthy diet. Cut back on foods high in saturated fat and sodium (salt) to lower cholesterol and blood pressure. Ask your doctor about how to start eating a healthy diet.
- If you are diabetic, control your blood sugar.
- Exercise. This sounds hard if you haven't exercised for a while, but try to do 30 minutes of aerobic exercise (that raises your heart rate) at least three times a week.
- If you're overweight, lose weight. Your doctor can advise you about the best ways to lose weight.
- If you have hypertension, control your blood pressure.

Talk to your doctor about whether aspirin would help reduce your risk of a heart attack. Aspirin can help keep your blood from forming clots that can eventually block the arteries.

For more information  
American Heart Association  
800-AHA-USA1 (800-242-8721)

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Revised May 1999  
RL 6.0