

CHEST PAIN

Chest pain includes feelings of heaviness, pressure, squeezing, or discomfort in the chest. Although chest pain has many possible causes, any chest discomfort that is new or different should be checked out. At worst, you have caught a serious problem, such as a heart problem, early enough to get needed emergency treatment; at best, it is nothing of concern and you have only lost a little time while gaining a great deal of peace of mind. Chest pain may also be an early sign of a disease that is slowly developing and treatment can begin before it becomes worse. Some possible causes of chest pain include heartburn, heart attack, gastric ulcer, anxiety, asthma, gallbladder, muscle strain, angina, pneumonia, blood clot (*embolism*) and rib cartilage inflammation.

What you can do:

It is important to identify any factors associated with the chest pain:

Exact location, type of pain, anything that seems to make it worse or better, and other symptoms you have at the same time.

Chest pain may be sharp or dull, mild or severe. It may come on suddenly or gradually, there may be a feeling of pressure and squeezing; or a stabbing sensation.

Other symptoms might include shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, dizziness, nausea, sweating, cough, or fever.

Note if it is worse with activity or movement and the time of day. Is it worse when you take a deep breath? Does the pain radiate, spreading down an arm, to the jaw, or the shoulder? How long does it last?

The more accurately and specifically you can describe the pain, the faster and more accurately diagnosis can be made and treatment can be started.

What your doctor can do:

Diagnosis will begin with a medical history and physical exam.

Tests are likely to include laboratory blood tests, a scan or X-ray of the lungs, cardiac catheterization, and *electrocardiogram* (ECG, a painless, noninvasive procedure that records electrical activity of the heart).

Because there are so many possible causes, other diagnostic test and treatments will vary widely. It may take some time to identify the exact cause.

Treatment may include:

Emergency measures, if the chest pain is related to heart problems.

What you can expect:

This will depend on the cause of the chest pain and necessary treatment.

Your doctor may allow you to continue regular activities, but be aware that there may be further incidents of pain, new symptoms, or a change in the severity or type of chest pain.

Call 911 or seek immediate medical assistance for sudden onset of chest pain in an adult, heaviness or pressure in the chest; pain that is severe or that radiates to the arm, shoulder, back, or jaw; when chest pain is accompanied by shortness of breath, sweating, nausea, and/or vomiting; or if you are unsure about the severity of symptoms! It is safer to assume it is related to the heart and seek help.