

Angina

Angina refers to the chest discomfort that occurs from a temporary lack of blood and oxygen to the heart. **Angina** is a symptom, not a disease, and usually is caused by **coronary heart disease**. Coronary heart disease occurs when one or more of the coronary arteries (arteries that supply blood to the heart) becomes partially or completely blocked. In contrast to angina, a heart attack (also called **myocardial infarction**) occurs when blood flow to part of the heart is cut off and part of the heart muscle dies.

Angina can be an early warning of serious heart disease. An article in the August 16, 2000, issue of *JAMA* discusses a new way for doctors to evaluate patients with unstable angina.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF ANGINA?

- Mild or severe pain, pressure, or discomfort in the center of the chest; often experienced as a tightness, heaviness, or squeezing sensation
- Chest pain or discomfort may spread to arms (usually the left arm), shoulder, neck, throat, jaw, back, or upper abdomen (angina pain also can occur in these areas without chest pain)
- Shortness of breath that occurs during physical activity or at times of emotional or psychological stress
- Chest pain or shortness of breath accompanied by sweating, weakness, or nausea

If symptoms of angina last for more than 5 minutes, they may signal a heart attack is occurring. You should seek emergency medical care and contact your doctor immediately.

WHAT IS STABLE ANGINA?

Some individuals known to have coronary heart disease experience episodes of angina on a regular basis (sometimes referred to as "stable angina") and can be given medication to treat it. Stable angina attacks usually follow a certain pattern. For instance, episodes of angina are commonly caused by exertion, typically last less than 5 minutes, and are relieved by rest. A person who experiences stable angina usually knows what caused his or her attack. For example, they may experience angina after overexertion (from physical activity) or may experience an angina episode after an emotional event (such as anger or stress).

WHAT IS UNSTABLE ANGINA?

When an episode of angina differs from a person's regular pattern it is considered "unstable." Having unstable angina does not always mean that you will have a heart attack, but requires evaluation by a doctor.

People who have been diagnosed with angina should be concerned if they:

- Have angina when they are resting
- Have angina that wakes them from sleep
- Have episodes of angina more often than usual or that last longer than usual
- Have episodes of angina that are more severe or intense than usual

If you experience any of the above symptoms of unstable angina, you should seek emergency medical care and contact your doctor immediately.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute
NHLBI Information Center
PO Box 30105
Bethesda, MD 20824-0105
301/592-8573 or
www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/
- American Heart Association
800 AHA-USA1 or
www.americanheart.org/

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm. A previous *JAMA* Patient Page on heart attack was published July 28, 1999.

Additional Sources: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, American Heart Association, American College of Cardiology, *The AMA Family Medical Guide*, *The AMA Complete Guide to Women's Health*

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