What Is Angina?

Angina is chest pain or discomfort that occurs when your heart doesn’t get as much blood and oxygen as it needs. In angina, the need for increased blood flow isn’t met for a short time. When increased demand for blood goes away, angina symptoms go away too.

Angina and heart attack have the same root cause: atherosclerosis. This is the buildup of fatty substances (plaque) in the coronary arteries. If one or more arteries are partly clogged, not enough blood can flow through, and you can feel chest pain or discomfort.

While the pain of angina may come and go, it’s a sign of heart disease and can be treated. Lifestyle changes, medications, medical procedures and surgery can help reduce angina.

What does angina feel like?

Angina usually lasts for just a few minutes. Angina discomfort is usually in the center of the chest, behind the breastbone.

Here’s how people say it feels:

- Chest feels tight or heavy.
- Feel short of breath (or hard to breathe).
- Pressure, squeezing or burning in chest.
- Discomfort may spread to arm, back, neck, jaw or stomach.
- Numbness or tingling in shoulders, arms or wrists.
- Sick to the stomach.

When will I get angina?

You may get angina when you...

- Climb stairs or carry groceries
- Feel angry or upset
- Work in very hot or cold weather
- Eat too much at one time
- Have sex
- Have emotional stress
- Exercise

What diagnostic tests might I have?

- Blood tests
- Electrocardiogram (EKG or ECG)
- Exercise stress test
- Cardiac catheterization
- Coronary angiogram

How is angina treated?

Your doctor may give you nitroglycerin. It is a
What Is Angina?

Angina is a type of heart disease in which the heart muscle doesn’t get enough oxygen. This lack of oxygen causes pain or discomfort that often feels like pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain in the center of the chest, just below the breastbone. Pain often spreads down the left arm, to the neck, jaw, or back. Angina may also feel like indigestion, heartburn, or discomfort in the right shoulder.

Angina is often caused by coronary artery disease (CAD). CAD is a condition in which a buildup of fatty deposits narrows the arteries that supply oxygen-rich blood to the heart. This condition can lead to a heart attack. Angina can happen when your heart is not getting all the blood or oxygen it needs because of the narrowed arteries.

When does Angina occur?

Angina usually happens during physical activity, stress, or when your body needs a lot of oxygen. During times of stress or activity, your heart needs more oxygen, so your arteries get wider to bring in more blood. If your arteries are narrowed by fatty plaque, the arteries may not be able to widen enough to bring in enough oxygen to your heart. This can cause pain or discomfort in your chest, arms, jaw, neck, or back.

When Angina occurs:

• During physical activity
• After a meal
• When you are breathing hard
• When you are nervous

What can I do about angina?

You can change your way of life and lower your chance of having angina attacks. A few simple steps can help you feel more comfortable every day:

• Stop smoking, and avoid second-hand smoke.
• Eat healthy meals low in saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol and salt.
• Control high blood pressure and blood cholesterol levels.
• Avoid extreme temperatures.
• Avoid strenuous activities.
• Learn to relax and manage stress.
• Call your doctor if your angina changes. For example, if you get angina while resting or if it ever gets worse.

HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

1. Talk to your doctor, nurse or other healthcare professionals. If you have heart disease or have had a stroke, members of your family also may be at higher risk. It’s very important for them to make changes now to lower their risk.

2. Call 1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721), or visit heart.org to learn more about heart disease.

3. For information on stroke, call 1-888-4-STROKE (1-888-478-7653) or visit us at StrokeAssociation.org.

Do you have questions for the doctor or nurse?

Take a few minutes to write your questions for the next time you see your healthcare provider. For example:

Can I exercise?

When should I call my doctor?

My Questions:

We have many other fact sheets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk, manage disease or care for a loved one. Visit heart.org/answersbyheart to learn more.

Knowledge is power, so Learn and Live!

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