

## Key Points

- Often there are symptoms of heart disease years before you have major heart problems.
- Common warning signs and symptoms include chest pain, shortness of breath, swelling in the legs and feet, pain in your calf muscles when you are walking, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol.
- If you have any of these warning signs, see your healthcare provider. You can lower your risk of heart attack or other problems caused by heart disease by following the treatment recommended by your provider.

## Why is it important to know the warning signs of heart disease?

Heart disease is a leading cause of death in the US. Often there are symptoms of heart disease years before you have major heart problems. The signs of heart disease are not the same for everyone, and symptoms can be a lot like symptoms of other problems. Here are some common warning signs and symptoms:

- Chest pain
- Shortness of breath, especially with activity
- Swelling in the legs and feet
- Pain in your calf muscles when you are walking
- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol

If you pay attention to these possible signs of heart and blood vessel disease and get treatment, you may prevent a serious problem later.

## Chest pain (angina)

Angina is pain, tightness, or pressure in your chest. It happens when your heart muscles are not getting enough oxygen. The symptoms of angina may vary from person to person. You may have discomfort in the chest that lasts for several minutes, or that goes away but keeps coming back. It can feel like

uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, or viselike pain. You may have discomfort in one or both arms or shoulders, or in your back, neck, or jaw. Angina can also feel like indigestion or heartburn, especially in women. It can happen with activity, after you eat, or when you are just resting. Chest pain that comes on unexpectedly, particularly when you are at rest, may mean that you are having a heart attack or will have a heart attack soon.

It is possible to have a heart attack with no warning and no pain, but many people have angina for days, weeks, or months before a heart attack. If you think you have been having angina, you should see your healthcare provider right away. Follow your provider's advice for control of blood pressure, cholesterol, blood sugar, smoking, diet, exercise, weight, and stress. This may help prevent a heart attack.

Call for help right away if you have symptoms of a heart attack. The most common symptoms include:

- Chest pain or pressure, squeezing, or fullness in the center of your chest that lasts more than a few minutes, or goes away and comes back (may feel like indigestion or heartburn)
- Pain or discomfort in one or both arms or shoulders, or in your back, neck, jaw, or stomach
- Trouble breathing
- You have taken nitroglycerin as your healthcare provider prescribed and the chest pain doesn't go away
- Breaking out in a cold sweat for no known reason
- If your provider has prescribed nitroglycerin for angina, pain that does not go away after taking your nitroglycerin as directed

Along with these symptoms, you may also feel very tired, faint, or sick to your stomach. Severe tiredness may start several days before your heart attack symptoms.

## Shortness of breath

Shortness of breath is the most common symptom of heart failure. Heart failure happens when the heart muscle can no longer pump enough blood to meet the body's needs. The blood begins to back up because the heart is not pumping well. Your lungs fill with fluid. This can make it hard for you to breathe.

If heart failure is not treated, it will get worse. If you begin to get breathless going upstairs, or with your usual physical activity, or if you need to be propped up with more pillows to breathe comfortably in bed at night, see your provider as soon as possible.

Shortness of breath from heart failure usually happens slowly over a long time. Sudden shortness of breath, even without chest pain, can be a symptom of a heart attack. Sudden shortness of breath is an emergency, even when there are no other symptoms.

## Swelling (edema) in the legs and feet

Many people have leg swelling from causes other than heart disease. However, the buildup of fluid in your legs can be a warning sign of heart problems. This is even more true if you have other symptoms, such as shortness of breath, especially with activity. You may have swelling in your belly, too. Tell your healthcare provider if your legs, ankles, or feet have become swollen.

## Pain in the legs with walking

Pain in your calf muscles when you walk can be a sign of heart and blood vessel disease. This type of pain happens only with activity and stops a minute or two after you stop walking. It happens when your muscles are not getting enough oxygen because of blocked arteries. Blocked leg arteries may mean that your heart arteries are also blocked.

## High blood pressure and high blood cholesterol

High blood pressure and high blood cholesterol are both warning signs of possible heart problems. You usually cannot tell if you have high blood pressure or high blood cholesterol without measuring your blood pressure or testing your blood. Both measurements can be done at health checkups. High blood pressure and high blood cholesterol can be treated by your healthcare provider.

High blood pressure also increases your risk of stroke, kidney

problems, and loss of vision. Lowering your blood pressure helps lower your risk of heart disease and these other problems.

## What should I do if have warning signs of heart disease?

If you have any of these warning signs, see your healthcare provider. Your provider will ask about your personal and family medical history, examine you, and do tests to check for heart disease. You can lower your risk of heart attack or other problems caused by heart disease by following the treatment recommended by your provider.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.



# HEART DISEASE: WARNING SIGNS



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