



Education

Warning Signs of Heart Disease

Why are warning signs of heart disease important?

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States. Often there are symptoms of heart disease years before you have major heart problems. Ignoring warning signs of heart disease can be fatal. Some common warning signs are chest pain, shortness of breath, swelling in the legs and feet, leg pain with walking, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol. If you pay attention to these possible signs of heart 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. It can be a discomfort in the chest that lasts for more than 2 minutes, or that goes away but keeps coming back. It can feel like uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, or viselike pain. There may be discomfort in other areas of the upper body, such as in one or both upper arms, the back, neck, or jaw. It can also feel like stomach indigestion or heartburn, especially in women.

Most angina occurs when you exercise and disappears with rest. A type of angina that comes on unexpectedly, particularly when you are at rest, is called unstable angina. Unstable angina is much more serious. It may mean that without immediate medical attention a heart attack will soon occur.

It is possible to have a heart attack with no warning, 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 health care provider tight away. Follow your provider's advice for control of blood pressure, cholesterol, smoking, diet, exercise, weight, and stress. This may help prevent a heart attack.

You need to call 911 for emergency help if:

- You are having chest pain at rest.
- You are having chest pain that doesn't stop when you quit your activity.
- The pain is getting worse over a period of 10 minutes.

Getting emergency help is especially urgent if you are having other symptoms such as nausea, lightheadedness, and shortness of breath as well as chest pain.

Shortness of breath

Shortness of breath is the most common symptom of heart failure. Heart failure occurs when the heart muscle is unable to ("fails to") pump enough blood to meet the body's needs. The blood begins to back up because the heart is not pumping well. The veins, tissues, and lungs become congested 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 after less and less exercise, or if you need to be propped by more pillows to breathe comfortably in bed, see your provider as soon as possible.

Shortness of breath from heart failure usually happens gradually over a long period of time. But sudden shortness of breath, even without chest pain, can mean a heart attack. There are usually other symptoms with the heart attack, such as nausea, sweating, and lightheadedness.

Swelling (edema) in the legs and feet

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

Pain in the legs with walking (claudication)

Pain that occurs in the 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 the activity. It occurs when your muscles are not getting enough oxygen because of blocked arteries. Blocked leg arteries may mean there are also blockages in the heart (coronary) arteries.

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 may be done at health checkups. A blood pressure machine may be available in your local pharmacy. High blood pressure and high blood cholesterol can be treated by your health care provider.

High blood pressure also greatly increases your chances of having a stroke. Lowering your blood pressure decreases your risk of having a stroke.

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

If you have any of these warning signs, see your health care provider. Your provider will ask about your personal and medical family history and examine you to see if you have heart disease. Following the treatment recommended by your provider can reduce your risk of heart attack or other problems caused by heart disease.

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