

Symptoms of Heart Disease

Public Information Pamphlets

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Fighting Heart Disease
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SYMPTOMS OF HEART DISEASE

Diseases of the Heart can be serious! It is the early recognition of the symptoms that enables you to seek timely medical help. This pamphlet aims at creating public awareness about the symptoms indicating heart disease.

HEART ATTACK

What is a Heart Attack?

A Heart Attack means "damage to the muscle of the heart" which can be of varying degrees ranging from minimal or partial to complete damage. At times the damage is totally recoverable and at other times it is not depending upon how severe the Heart Attack has been.

What causes a Heart Attack?

A Heart Attack results due to the sudden blockade of the blood vessels that carry nutrition and oxygen to the muscles of the heart. As a result of this, the muscles suffer damage and "cry out in pain".

What are the symptoms of a Heart Attack?

Lack of oxygen causes a variety of symptoms, which may or may not be felt as pain. These symptoms are ***Chest discomfort***: This is a feeling of heaviness, fullness, pressure, squeezing or discomfort usually in the centre of the chest. The pain may also travel up to the neck, jaw, arms or the back.

Shortness of breath: Suddenly becoming short of breath can be the sign of a Heart Attack. It is caused by the inability of the heart to pump blood properly.

Sweating: The combination of profuse cold sweat and nausea often tells you that you are having a Heart Attack.

Weakness: You may feel weak or dizzy especially when you stand up.

All these symptoms may be present alone or in combination, however in 10% of all cases of a Heart Attack there are absolutely no symptoms and this is what is known as a "Silent Heart Attack".

What should be done if you think you are having a Heart Attack?

A Heart Attack is one of the most serious threats to life. However with recent advances in the medical management involving new techniques, mortality from a Heart Attack can be significantly minimised. In this context the role of clot-dissolving treatment in the early hours after a Heart Attack (Thrombolytic therapy) is very important. The sooner you come to the hospital after a Heart Attack the more useful this Clot dissolving medicine will be. If you get to the hospital within the "Golden Hour" after a Heart Attack, your chances for a full recovery greatly improve. In addition to this, specialised areas in most hospitals called the coronary care units (CCU) are specially equipped to handle complications arising in a Heart Attack which may prove to be life saving. However it is for your doctor to decide how best to treat your Heart Attack.

It is important to note that there are many other causes of pain in the chest, and that pain in the chest does not always mean a Heart Attack!

ANGINA

What is Angina?

Angina is "pain" or "discomfort" in the chest. It is dull in nature and people describe it as a sense of heaviness, tightness, pressure or squeezing. It is usually located in the centre of the chest and usually lasts a few minutes at a time. Other than the chest it radiates to the left

arm more commonly than the right. It can also be experienced in the upper abdomen, in the jaw or in the neck and it may also cause numbness in the shoulder, arm or wrist. In some people anginal pain is never experienced and they have what we refer to as "silent heart disease". Patients with Diabetes are particularly prone to this but those with out Diabetes can also have "silent heart disease". Angina is usually brought on by physical activity and is relieved by resting.

Emotional stress and a heavy meal can also bring about Angina. Pain of Angina may rarely be continuous, even after resting in which case immediate medical attention should be sought.

How is Angina produced?

Heart is the strongest muscle in the body. It pumps blood through miles of vessels to the entire body area. The heart needs an effective supply of nourishment to carry out this role of a pump. Nourishment to the heart is supplied by special blood vessels. In "Angina" these vessels get narrowed due to the deposition of fat or "Cholesterol" in their wall, narrowing the lumen. As a result of this the needed increased blood flow cannot be delivered to the heart during times of stress such as exercise. This is felt as chest pain or "Angina".

Does pain in the chest always mean Angina?

Pain in the chest could be due to a number of reasons, which include

- Pulled muscle of the neck, shoulder or chest.
- Degenerative changes in the bones of the neck (cervical spondylosis)
- Common colds and coughs.
- "Ulcer disease".
- "Heart burn" due to digestive problems.
- Abnormalities of the valves of the heart.
- Anxiety

So do not worry unduly, chest pain does not always mean "Angina"

PALPITATIONS

I feel my heart beating"
"I feel my heart missing a beat"
"I feel my heart beating hard"

Palpitations mean, "becoming aware" of the heart beating. We have all experienced palpitations because they occur in every day life in situations of fear, anger, fever, anxiety and stomach upset without any evidence of heart disease. In most cases "palpitations" have no serious significance. It is however difficult to distinguish such, harmless palpitations which are normal and those, which are as a result of heart disease. Palpitations caused by heart disease are usually alarming and these bouts last for seconds, minutes or even hours. Some patients may have rare attacks while others may have attacks everyday. Attacks may occur suddenly and unexpectedly but a few may be provoked by specific circumstances such as physical exertion

. Palpitations should cause alarm if they are

- Frequent.
- If the rate of beating is very slow, very fast, or markedly irregular.
- If they are associated with dizziness, loss of consciousness, pain in the chest, mental disorientation or shortness of breath.

Visit your doctor if you have such symptoms.

BREATHLESSNESS

All of us experience breathlessness with excess physical activity or emotion. However when breathlessness is

out of proportion to physical activity or comes on at rest it may indicate disease of the lung or the heart.

Breathlessness can occur in heart disease if the heart is unable to pump enough blood as a result of which the lungs start getting filled with fluid. A special feature of this type of breathlessness is that it is worse when the person is lying down flat as during sleep, rather than sitting up or standing. In this situation the patient may wake up in the middle of the night with a sensation of choking and breathlessness. If you experience such symptoms, you must visit your doctor.

COUGH

Cough is a very common symptom. Most of us especially those who smoke cigarettes complain about it. Patients suffering from asthma, chronic bronchitis and other diseases of the lung also cough from time to time. In the case of chronic smokers cough may be accompanied by "phlegm" as well. In heart disease cough occurs as part of heart failure as the heart is unable to pump blood into the body, and the blood backs up into the lungs. Cough in this situation may be dry or it may be accompanied by frothy phlegm.

TIREDNESS

Tiredness is a common symptom in everyday life. The individual threshold for getting tired varies from one to the other. Being overweight, having lack of exercise and emotional depression can also cause undue tiredness. Certain medicines and many diseases can all cause undue tiredness. However undue fatigue is also a symptom of heart disease, especially when it is associated with the other symptoms of heart disease described in this pamphlet.

FAINTING

There are many causes of sudden fainting, the commonest being "vaso vagal fainting". This means an attack of fainting which results due to sudden emotion. Fainting can also result from diseases of the nerves and the blood vessels. Unprovoked fainting can also be due to heart disease in which case a proper evaluation is needed.

The early recognition of the symptoms of Cardiac disease is very important as it draws attention to the disease and allows prompt measures to be taken in terms of diagnosis and treatment. These guidelines for symptom analysis are not a substitute for what your doctor might tell you and are not intended to create a cardiac neurosis but to make the general public aware about the symptomatology of heart disease so that they can resort to early medical help if needed.

The guidelines described in this booklet are meant for adults and are not intended as a substitute for the advice your doctor may give you based on his knowledge of your particular illness.

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No 1 - Prevent a Heart Attack

No 2 - Symptoms of Heart Disease

No 3 - All About high Blood pressure

No 4 - Smoking and Your Heart

No 5 - Cholesterol and Your Heart

No 6 - Food and Your Heart

Heart disease is one of the biggest killers' worldwide, with a particularly high prevalence in the indoPak Subcontinent. Heartfile is a non profit organisation fighting heart disease in Pakistan and aims to extend this service to the rest of the developing world. We rely entirely on voluntary contributions to carry out our work and your help in this connection will be greatly appreciated.

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