



**My** Health  
**Digest**



## Pericarditis

Pericarditis is inflammation of the pericardium, a sac-like structure with two thin layers of tissue that surround the heart to hold it in place and help it work. A small amount of fluid keeps the layers separate so there's less friction between them as the heart beats.

A common [symptom](#) of pericarditis is [chest pain](#), caused by the sac's layers becoming inflamed and possibly rubbing against the heart. It may feel like pain from a heart attack.

### Causes:

The cause of pericarditis is often unknown, but viral infections are a common reason. Pericarditis may occur after a respiratory or digestive system infection.

Chronic and recurring pericarditis may be caused by autoimmune disorders such as lupus, scleroderma and rheumatoid arthritis. These are disorders in which the body's immune system makes antibodies that mistakenly attack the body's tissues or cells.

### Symptoms:

Chest pain is the most common symptom. It feels like a sharp or stabbing pain. However, some people have dull, achy or pressure-like chest pain.

Pericarditis pain usually occurs behind the breastbone or on the left side of the chest. The pain may:

- Spread to the left shoulder and neck
- Get worse when coughing, lying down or taking a deep breath
- Get better when sitting up or leaning forward





## Complications:

- Fluid buildup around the heart (pericardial effusion) that can lead to further heart complications.
- Thickening and scarring of the heart lining (constrictive pericarditis). People with long-term pericarditis develop permanent thickening and scarring of the pericardium. The changes prevent the heart from filling and emptying properly. This unusual complication often leads to severe swelling of the legs and abdomen and shortness of breath.
- Pressure on the heart due to fluid buildup (cardiac tamponade). This life-threatening condition prevents the heart from filling properly. Less blood leaves the heart, causing a dramatic drop in blood pressure. Cardiac tamponade requires emergency treatment.

## Diagnosis:

Physical exam is used with diagnostic tests like:

ECG

Echocardiography

Cardiac CT (computed tomography)

## Treatment:

At first the doctor may advise to rest until you feel better and have no fever.

If your pericarditis is caused by a viral infection, you may be told to take medicines to reduce pain and inflammation.

If a bacterial infection is causing your pericarditis, your doctor will prescribe an antibiotic or other medicine. You may need to stay in the hospital during treatment so your doctor can check you for complications.





**Prevention:**

Acute pericarditis can't be prevented. But you can take steps to reduce your chance of having another acute episode, complications or chronic pericarditis. These steps include getting prompt treatment, following your treatment plan and getting ongoing medical care as needed.

