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What Is a Heart Attack?

[Español](#)

A heart attack happens when the flow of blood in one or more of the coronary arteries (major blood vessels that supply blood to the heart), suddenly becomes blocked. When this happens, part of your heart can't get enough oxygen.

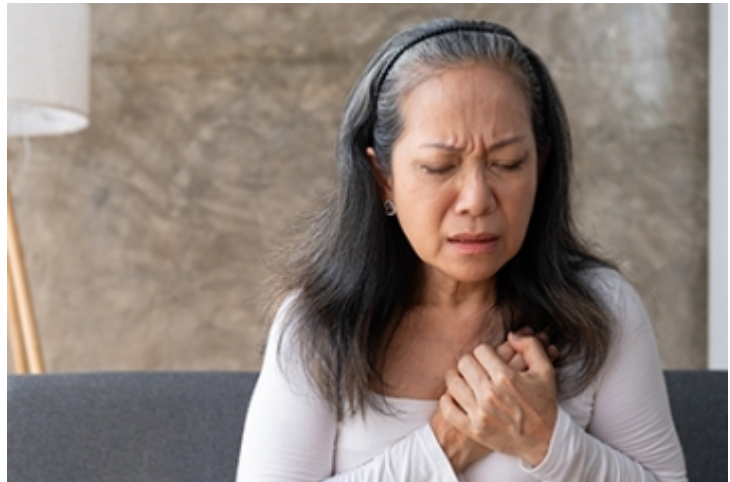
A heart attack is usually caused by coronary artery disease, which happens when a sticky, waxy substance called plaque builds up inside the arteries, causing them to narrow. The plaque can break open, causing blood clots that, if they grow large enough, will block blood flow to the heart. If blood flow isn't restored quickly, the heart muscle begins to die.

To restore blood flow, doctors may use a medicine to dissolve the blockage. Or they may place a thin flexible tube called a catheter into an artery in the top of your leg or arm to physically open the blockage. If the clot or plaque blocking blood flow is particularly long or has certain qualities, the cardiologist may use a catheter with a stent, which is a cylinder made of thin metal mesh that helps hold the artery open.

Heart attacks are very common. They can occur in both men and women. Each year, more than 800,000 people in the United States have a heart attack.

A heart attack is a life-threatening medical emergency that needs immediate attention. Knowing the warning signs of a heart attack may help save a life. The signs can include:

- Crushing chest pain or pressure in the center or left side of the chest
- Pain, numbness, and/or tingling in the shoulders, arms, neck, jaw, or back
- Shortness of breath when active, at rest, or while lying flat
- Fainting, lightheadedness, or sudden dizziness
- Rapid or irregular heartbeat
- Cold sweats
- Nausea, vomiting, or stomach upset
- Tiredness or [fatigue](#)
- Weakness



Glossary

Find the definitions of common heart health terms in the **Heart Health Glossary**.

- Anxiety

The symptoms of a heart attack can be different in men and women. Women are more likely than men to experience shortness of breath; tiredness; weakness; upset stomach; anxiety; and pain in the shoulder, back, or arm. Women may also face more health problems after a heart attack, so it's very important if you're experiencing any symptoms or think you're having a heart attack to seek medical assistance as soon as possible.

Although these problems can be signs of a heart attack, they can also be associated with other health conditions. Tell your doctor about any health concerns you have.

If you or someone you know might be having a heart attack, call 911 right away. Also call 911 if you are taking prescription drugs for [angina](#) (chest pain) and the pain doesn't go away after you take the medication. You need to take an ambulance to the hospital as soon as possible. Do not try to drive yourself, and do not have someone else drive you unless there is no ambulance service where you live. The sooner you get to a hospital, the more emergency medical professionals can do to stop any heart damage and prevent deadly heart rhythm problems, heart failure, and death. If blood flow in the blocked artery can be restored quickly, it may prevent permanent damage to the heart.

The good news is that excellent treatments are available for heart attacks. These treatments — which work best when given right after symptoms begin — can save lives and help prevent disability after a heart attack.

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