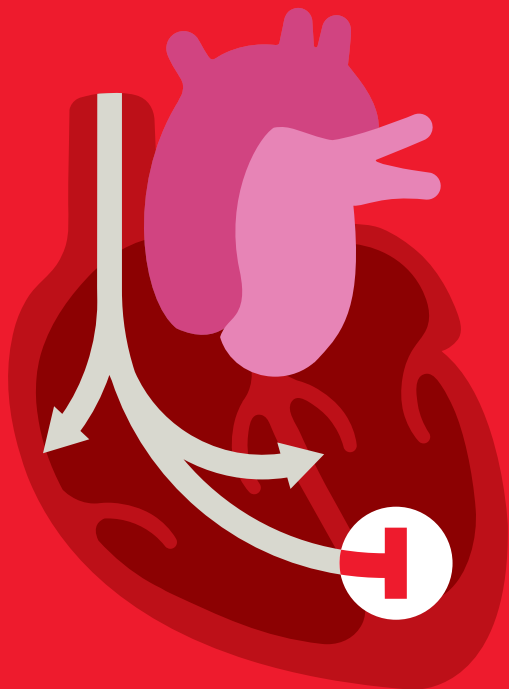




# Heart Attack

## Your quick guide



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British Heart  
Foundation

Coronary heart disease is the UK's single biggest killer.

For over 50 years we've pioneered research that's transformed the lives of people living with heart and circulatory conditions. Our work has been central to the discoveries of vital treatments that are changing the fight against heart disease.

But so many people still need our help. From babies born with life-threatening heart problems to the many Mums, Dads and Grandparents who survive a heart attack and endure the daily battles of living with heart failure.

Join our fight for every heartbeat in the UK. Every pound raised, minute of your time and donation to our shops will help make a difference to people's lives.

**FIGHT  
FOR EVERY  
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## What is a heart attack?

A heart attack happens when there is a sudden loss of blood flow to a part of your heart muscle.

Most heart attacks are caused by coronary heart disease.

A heart attack is life threatening and you need to have treatment as soon as possible.

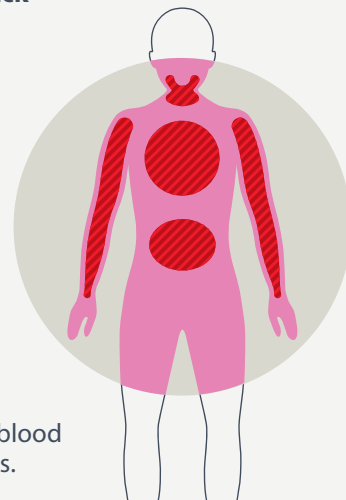


## What are the signs and symptoms of a heart attack?

### Symptoms of a heart attack

- Pain or discomfort in your chest that doesn't go away.
- The pain may spread to your left or right arm or may spread to your neck and jaw.
- You may feel sick or short of breath.

During a heart attack there is also the risk of having a cardiac arrest. This is when your heart stops pumping blood and normal breathing stops.



**If you ever think you are having a heart attack, call 999 immediately.**

Too many people risk their lives by waiting too long to call for an ambulance. If in doubt, call 999. It could save your life.



## How is a heart attack diagnosed?

**If you are having a suspected heart attack the ambulance staff will want to:**

- take an ECG
- reduce your pain or discomfort
- start treatment to reduce or prevent damage to your heart
- resuscitate you if you go into cardiac arrest.

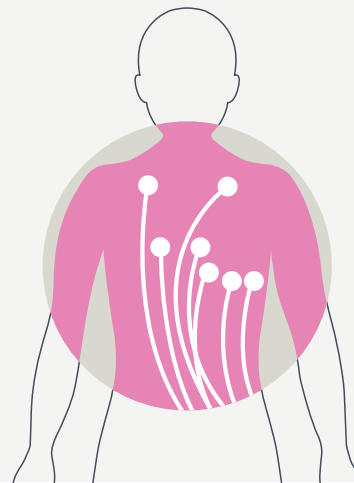
**Once you arrive at hospital you will be seen immediately by a doctor or nurse.**

**This will include:**

- more ECGs
- an assessment of your symptoms and medical history
- physical examinations, including measuring your blood pressure and monitoring your heart rhythm and heart rate
- a blood test called a troponin test (to detect if there has been any damage to your heart muscle).

### What is an ECG?

An ECG (also known as an electrocardiogram) is a test to look at the electrical activity of your heart. It is used to find out if your symptoms are due to a heart attack.

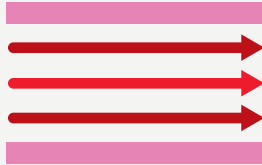


## What causes a heart attack?

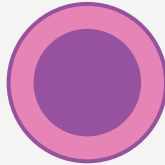
**Most heart attacks happen when the inside of one or more of your coronary arteries become narrowed due to a gradual build-up of fatty deposits called atheroma.**

## How fatty material builds up

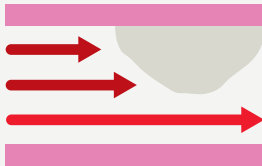
Normal blood flow through the coronary artery.



Cross section



Fatty deposits cause a narrowing and restrict the flow of blood through the artery.



The fatty area of atheroma in the artery wall is called a plaque.

**If a plaque breaks, a blood clot forms to try to repair the damaged artery wall. This blood clot can totally block your coronary artery, causing part of your heart muscle to be starved of blood.**



## What treatment will I need?

If you have a heart attack, you need to have treatment as soon as possible. Early treatment to get the blood flowing to the damaged part of your heart muscle again can save your life and limit the amount of permanent damage to your heart muscle. Many people who have a heart attack need to have emergency treatment to unblock the coronary artery.

- You might have a treatment called **primary angioplasty**, which is a procedure to re-open the blocked coronary artery and usually involves inserting one or more stents to help keep the narrowed artery open.
- Or you might have **thrombolysis**, which means giving you a 'clot-busting' medicine to dissolve the blood clot that is blocking the coronary artery.



## Yvonne's story

### Yvonne, 54, had a heart attack after arriving at work one day.

"All of a sudden it felt as if someone had picked up a sledgehammer and whacked me in my chest.

I stood for a few minutes.

I could hardly speak, I could hardly breathe and within minutes I got all of these pains down my arms. I was sweating. People said: 'You look awful'.

I said: 'If I wanted to be a drama queen I would say I'm having a heart attack'.

I went to the doctor. I said to her I think I've got the strangest chest infection. She said there was nothing wrong with my chest and sent me to the hospital.

I had a lot of tests for an hour and then I saw this doctor walking towards me with a wheelchair. My reaction was to start laughing. She said: 'I don't make jokes about things like that' and asked me to get into the wheelchair.

I was taken to the cardiac unit and had an angiogram. They felt that with lifestyle changes and medication I would be ok. I went to cardiac rehab, looked at my lifestyle and started eating more healthily."



“I view my heart now as the engine of a car. **If the engine packs up, everything is gone.**”

Yvonne, survivor



## How long will I need to stay in hospital for?

You will need to have more tests while you are in hospital. You will have more ECGs and you are likely to be attached to a heart monitor some of the time, to check for any problems with your heart rhythm or heart rate. You may also have some other tests, to look more closely at your heart and how it is working, and to help decide on the best form of treatment for you.

You will usually stay in hospital for about three to five days, depending on what type of treatment you have had and how well you begin to recover.





## What happens to my heart after a heart attack?

A heart attack can be a frightening experience and it can take time to come to terms with what has happened. It's natural to be worried about your recovery and future. Many people make a full recovery and within a few months are able to return to their normal activities. Some people may find that they are not able to do as much as they previously did, but attending cardiac rehabilitation will increase your chances of getting back to normal as quickly as possible.



## Will it happen again?

Having one heart attack does increase the risk of having another, but this risk is greatly reduced with the correct treatment. And, if you take the medicines your doctors have prescribed for you and follow a healthy lifestyle, you can significantly reduce your risk.



## Do I need to take medicines every day?

After a heart attack you will need to start taking medicines every day, and will need to take most of them for the rest of your life. If you already had a heart condition before you had your heart attack, you may already be taking some or all of these medicines.

### Take medicine daily to:

- Help to prevent another heart attack
- Prevent or treat symptoms of angina





## I'm afraid to do too much in case it brings on another heart attack.

It's natural to feel concerned about exercising after your heart attack. Your heart is a muscle and, like any other muscle in your body, it needs physical activity to keep it in good condition. At first this will be gentle activity. But you will then gradually do more activity for longer, as you become physically stronger and more confident.



## What is cardiac rehabilitation?

After a heart attack you are usually referred to a cardiac rehabilitation service for specialist advice and physical activity, if there is one available in your area. Everyone's needs are different and the service you are offered will depend on what has happened to you. Going to cardiac rehabilitation – often called cardiac rehab – can reduce the risk of dying after a heart attack and helps improve some of the risk factors for coronary heart disease. It also aims to promote your health and keep you well.

# Risk factors

**A risk factor is something that increases your chances of getting a disease.**

**High blood pressure**



**Smoking**



**High cholesterol**



**Weight and body shape**



**Diabetes**



**Not doing enough physical activity**



**The good news is that for most risk factors for coronary heart disease, you can do something about them.**





## Use this space to make notes for discussions with your doctor.

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### Join us in the fight for every heartbeat.

**For 50 years the British Heart Foundation has been funding life-saving heart research. Our work has been central to the discoveries of vital treatments that are changing the fight against heart disease. But we need your support to continue this fight.**

**Visit [bhf.org.uk](http://bhf.org.uk) to make a donation or find out more.**

### For more information

You can order our booklet **Heart attack** for more information. If you had a primary angioplasty as an emergency treatment for your heart attack, you will find it more helpful to order our booklet **Primary angioplasty for a heart attack** instead.

### Other booklets and leaflets include:

Cardiac rehabilitation

ECG

My progress record

To order our booklets or DVDs:

call **0300 200 2222**

email **[orderline@bhf.org.uk](mailto:orderline@bhf.org.uk)**

or visit **[bhf.org.uk/publications](http://bhf.org.uk/publications)**

### Contact

For more information visit the British Heart Foundation website **[bhf.org.uk](http://bhf.org.uk)**

### Heart Helpline **0300 330 3311**

(a similar cost to 01 and 02 numbers)

For information and support on anything heart-related.