

Fact Sheet for Medicare Beneficiaries: Understanding a Heart Attack

What is a heart attack?

A heart attack, or an acute myocardial infarction, occurs when the blood supply to heart muscle is reduced or blocked. This happens because one or more arteries in the heart have a build-up of plaque (fat-like deposits) inside of them. When plaque ruptures, a blood clot forms and prevents blood from moving through the artery. Therefore, the heart muscle does not receive the oxygen and nutrients it needs to make the heart work. A heart attack is a serious medical condition.

What are the symptoms of a heart attack?

The symptoms may include one or more of the following:

- an uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness, or pain in the center of the chest that lasts for more than a few minutes or comes and goes
- a pain or discomfort in one or both arms, back, jaw, or stomach
- shortness of breath with or before chest discomfort
- a cold sweat
- nausea
- lightheadedness

How serious is a heart attack?

Cardiovascular (heart/blood vessel) disease is the biggest killer in the United States. One-third of people who have heart attacks die and over 80% of all heart-attack deaths occur in people age 65 or older.

What should I do if I think I'm having a heart attack?

Minutes are critical! Call 9-1-1 or emergency medical services immediately.

What should I expect when I'm hospitalized with a heart attack?

A heart attack is a medical emergency that needs to be addressed quickly to prevent permanent damage to your heart, or death. If you're hospitalized with a heart attack, ask your doctor about:

- aspirin to prevent blood clotting and a beta blocker to slow your heart rate (both drugs may become part of your treatment after discharge)
- a drug called an ACE inhibitor
- smoking cessation counseling
- medical procedures, such as angioplasty or reperfusion therapy to open blocked arteries in the heart



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