



- More than 1.2 million people suffer from heart attacks in the United States each year. Nearly 500,000 of them die.
- A heart attack is the single most common cause of death in the U.S.
- A heart attack happens once every 20 seconds. And, someone dies of a heart attack every minute of every day!
- Almost half of the people who die each year from heart disease are women.

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Heart attacks can happen to anyone, anytime, anywhere, during *rest* or *exercise*.

## A Heart Attack Fact Sheet

Just for You from In the Know!



### HEART ATTACKS & THE HEART

Have you heard of a “myocardial infarction”? It means “death of the heart muscle” and is the medical term for a heart attack. For many years, people thought that heart disease was a “man’s disease”. But now we know that plenty of women have heart attacks, too!

The heart is a hard working machine—and probably the most important muscle of the entire body. The heart’s job is to pump blood and oxygen to every part of the body.

For the heart to pump, it needs a huge amount of oxygen of its own. So, to keep the body going, the heart “feeds” itself first. The rest of the body gets the leftover oxygen.

A heart attack happens when oxygen can’t get to one part of the heart because of a blockage in a heart blood vessel. This blockage might be temporary or permanent, but, either way, it prevents oxygen from getting to the heart. The heart muscle gets so “starved” for oxygen that it becomes damaged or even dies.

It’s very important to learn about the risk factors and the warning signs of a heart attack so that you can help your clients— before, during, and after a heart attack.

And, remember...what people *don’t* know about heart attacks can kill them.

### WHAT HAPPENS DURING A HEART ATTACK?

A heart attack happens when one of the heart’s blood vessels becomes blocked by a blood clot or a buildup of fat. The blockage keeps blood and oxygen from getting to the heart, and the heart tissue begins to die.

Usually, a heart attack causes chest pains called *angina*. The pain is severe during a heart attack—usually lasting 15 minutes or more—and angina medication doesn’t help.

If a heart attack is mild, only a small area of the heart is affected. If it’s severe, a large area is affected and may be permanently damaged. The victim may die.

Remember, sometimes there are no symptoms and victims don’t even know they have heart disease. These attacks are silent killers known as *sudden cardiac death* (SCD) or *cardiac arrest*. They happen instantly or right after the warning signs start.

## HEART ATTACK WARNING SIGNS!

According to the American Heart Association, the following are common warning signs of a heart attack:

- Uncomfortable pressure, fullness, squeezing or pain in the center of the chest—the pain lasts more than a few minutes or may go away and come back.
- Pain spreading to the shoulders, neck or arms.
- Lightheadedness, fainting, sweating, nausea, or shortness of breath.
- Other warning signs that are not as common include:
  - Unusual stomach or abdominal pain.
  - Nausea or dizziness.
  - Shortness of breath and difficulty breathing.
  - Unexplained anxiety, weakness or fatigue.
  - Palpitations (a racing heart), cold sweat or paleness.

Not everyone has all the warning signs and/or all of the symptoms of a heart attack.

Sometimes there aren't any symptoms and the heart attack kills with no warning at all!

To make things even more difficult, the symptoms of a heart attack aren't always clear cut. People tend to brush them off as minor problems such as heartburn or the "flu".

Denial is another common symptom of a heart attack. *And, denial can be deadly.* It prevents people from getting the help they need. (Remember...doctors can do the most good in the first hour after the heart attack.)

**If you think someone is having a heart attack, call 911 right away!**

**Heart attack victims have described their "discomfort" as:**  
"pressure in the chest"  
"a feeling of weakness"  
"a feeling of indigestion"  
"having a touch of the flu"

## TIPS FOR HELPING CLIENTS AFTER A HEART ATTACK

- Remind your clients to take their medications ON TIME! Heart medications help the heart and blood vessels work better. If they aren't taken on schedule, they won't work as well.
- Be alert! Depression is very common in heart attack survivors. It can be mild or serious and may last several months. But, if a client is depressed *all* the time, it can be hard on the heart. Watch your clients for the signs of depression and report any changes to your supervisor.
- Be reassuring! After a heart attack, your clients may be afraid of being alone or of doing any kind of exercise/activity at all.
- Be supportive! Most people who recover from heart attacks have to change their eating habits—



*Want more information about heart attacks?*

Try the American Heart Organization at [www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)

especially if they are overweight, have high cholesterol or high blood pressure.

- Encourage your clients to give up smoking! Remember...a person is *never* too old to kick the habit.