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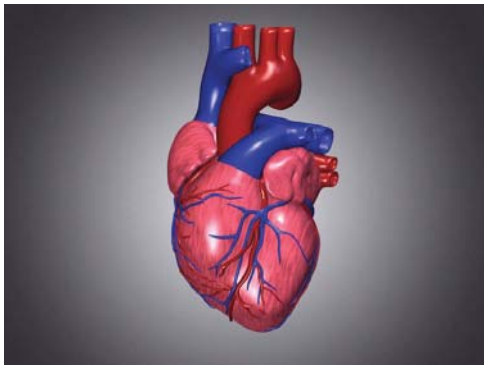
Heart attack



A heart attack (myocardial infarction) occurs when the blood supply to a part of the heart muscle is seriously decreased or stops. The blood flow decrease or stoppage happens when there is a blockage in one or more of the coronary arteries that take blood to the heart muscle. This tends to occur due to an accumulation of plaque, which is known as arteriosclerosis (or atherosclerosis). Finally, plaque can tear or break off and cause a blood clot and plug the artery. This causes the heart attack. The blockage of a coronary artery can also be called coronary thrombosis or coronary occlusion.

If blood stops coming for more than a few minutes, the muscle cells are permanently damaged and die. This damage to the heart muscle can make the patient die or remain seriously disabled, depending on how much the heart muscle has been damaged. Most major medical centers have special protocols to treat heart attack victims as quickly as possible by opening up the blocked artery with clot busting medicine or doing an emergency angiogram with an angioplasty or stent to open up the blocked artery. Just as important are many different medicines that should be given to a heart attack victim while they are recovering in the hospital and then usually indefinitely thereafter. Cardiac rehabilitation and careful follow-up with a cardiologist often allow victims who have had a heart attack to go back to living a relatively normal and fulfilling life. Major advances in the treatment of heart attack have markedly improved the odds of surviving and having a signficant recovery from a heart attack.

Sometimes a coronary artery contracts momentarily or suffers a spasm. When this spasm occurs, the artery narrows and the blood flow to part of the heart muscle may decrease or stop. A prolonged severe spasm can cause a heart attack.

There are several known risk factors that increase the risk of suffering a heart attack. Your doctor or a preventive cardiologist can help identify if you are at increased risk of having a heart attack. Sometimes, tests can help identify if plaque is present in the coronary arteries. Often, modification of risk factors with lifestyle modification and/or medications as indicated can reduce the risk of having a heart attack.

For more information on heart attack or myocardial infarction, click here.

Written by and/or reviewed by Mark K. Urman, M.D. and Jeffrey F. Caren, M.D.
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