

A N G I N A

PATIENT/FAMILY INFORMATION SHEET

What is angina?

Angina (angina pectoris) is temporary chest pain that occurs when the heart does not get enough oxygen. It may be a feeling of tightness, heaviness, dull discomfort, numbness, burning, pressure, or crushing pain that is usually felt behind the breastbone. Some people may feel discomfort in the shoulders, arms, neck, jaw, teeth, or back. Others may feel as if they are having indigestion.

What is stable and unstable angina?

Stable angina describes episodes of chest discomfort that are usually predictable. It will occur when a person is under physical, mental or emotional stress. Stable angina is relieved with rest and/or nitroglycerin.

Unstable angina is chest pain that is unexpected and will usually occur at rest. Unstable angina places one at risk for a heart attack, severe cardiac arrhythmias or sudden death and should be treated as an emergency.

When are anginal episodes most likely to occur?

Episodes of angina occur when the heart needs more oxygen than what is available. In other words, the heart has to work harder during activities such as walking up a hill, eating a heavy meal, going out in hot or cold weather, or when reacting to stress. An episode can last between 30 seconds and 30 minutes but generally lasts for less than 5 minutes. A person with stable angina will eventually be able to recognize a pattern of when anginal episodes occur and how long their anginal episodes last.

Is an anginal episode the same as a heart attack?

An anginal episode is not a heart attack. When a heart attack occurs, a portion of the heart receives little or no oxygen for a longer period of time and a portion of the heart muscle dies. Anginal pain is caused by a temporary lack of oxygen to the heart muscle and does not cause permanent damage. However, if angina is not treated, a heart attack could occur. A physician should be notified when angina first develops or if the usual pattern of anginal episodes changes.

How is angina treated?

Angina can be treated with nitroglycerin or other medications such as beta-blockers or calcium channel blockers. The most effective treatment for reducing angina is living a healthy lifestyle. This includes exercising moderately under the direction of a physician, eating a healthy diet (rich in fresh fruits and vegetables, lean meats and low fat dairy products), limiting alcohol consumption*, and not smoking.

How can I tell if I'm having a heart attack?

Because the symptoms of angina and heart attack are similar, it is important to report all new symptoms to your physician and to go to the emergency room if you are unsure if your pain is related to angina or a heart attack. In general, anginal pain will go away within ten minutes after rest and taking prescribed nitroglycerin. Symptoms of a heart attack are stronger than those of angina. According to the American Heart Association, symptoms of a heart attack include the following:

- Uncomfortable pressure, fullness, squeezing, or pain in the center of the chest lasting more than a few minutes
- Pain spreading to the shoulders, neck or arms. The pain may be mild or intense. It may feel like pressure, tightness, burning, or heavy weight. It may be located in the chest, upper abdomen, neck, jaw, or inside the arms and shoulders
- Chest discomfort with lightheadedness, fainting, profuse sweating, nausea, or shortness of breath
- Anxiety, nervousness and/or cold, sweaty skin
- Paleness or pallor
- Increased or irregular heart rate
- Feeling of impending doom

If you have one or more of these symptoms, call 9-1-1 (the Emergency Medical Service *EMS*) immediately. Remember, EMS is not "just a ride", it brings treatment to you. Many treatments are available that greatly improve chances of survival if they are given quickly after heart attack symptoms first appear. EMS can start those treatments even before you arrive at the hospital.

Reference: American Heart Association – <http://www.americanheart.org>

*Limit alcohol consumption to one to two drinks per day for men and one drink per day for women. (A drink is one 12-oz. beer, 4 oz. of wine, 1.5 oz. of 80-proof spirits, or 1 oz. of 100-proof spirits.)

For more Patient Education Fact Sheets, see the Greenwich Hospital web site at www.greenhosp.org and click on Patients & Visitors, then Patient Education Rev. 8/04