

Simple Compendium of Heart Diseases and Their Symptoms

By Ann Gerhardt MD

July 2024

A recent conversation reminded me that most non-medical people don't realize that there are many more types of heart disease than a clutch-the-chest heart attack, which occurs when an artery supplying blood to heart muscle is so clogged that an area of heart muscle dies.

This is a short list of heart diseases and some of their typical symptoms.

Myocardial infarction is the medical name for heart attack. Men have clutch-the-chest pain, at times associated with nausea, sweating, lightheadedness, left arm pain, shortness of breath and fatigue.

Women die more frequently from a myocardial infarction than men because they often don't have so-called classic chest pain, delaying appreciation of the correct diagnosis.

Other causes of heart pain are infection, often caused by viruses, and inflammation of the heart muscle, one or more of the heart valves or the pericardium, the sac holding the heart in the chest separate from the lungs. These infections cause fever, sweats and fatigue and may progress to heart failure.

Pain isn't the most common sign of heart disease. Fatigue and shortness of breath, with or without physical activity, often accompanied by lightheadedness, are. These may result if one or more of the heart valves becomes too tight or floppy, causing the heart muscle to work harder to compensate and pump blood to the body.

Heart valves can fail to function properly, usually causing a murmur and sometimes lightheadedness. If severe, the heart may enlarge to compensate.

People may pass out from heartbeat rhythm abnormalities or changes from regular to very fast or very slow, reducing blood delivered to the brain.

Any and all of the above conditions, plus diabetes, obesity and exposure to a toxin or medication side effect, may seriously compromise heart muscle function so much that the heart fails, with all of the symptoms mentioned above, except pain. Additional heart failure symptoms are swollen abdomen and/or legs and feet, shortness of breath when lying flat, and waking suddenly at night gasping for breath.

A large heart attack or serious arrhythmia can kill quickly. Many other heart diseases may kill but not necessarily quickly.

Remember that "heart disease" comes in many different types. Optimal diets and exercise that might protect against heart attack don't necessarily protect against the other heart diseases, except for those associated with obesity and diabetes. However, it's good to have healthy cardiac arteries when a new heart problem appears. So exercise, consume a prudent diet, reduce stress, avoid people with infections like the common cold, don't use tobacco, excess alcohol or other harmful drugs and sleep restfully at least 8 hours nightly.¶