

# Become Heart Smart - Know the Signs of a Heart Attack



In real life, having a heart attack isn't always as dramatic as it is played out in the movies or on TV. Numerous heart attacks start slowly and may not even include chest pain.

"Many people think their symptoms are a sign of something else, like heartburn, or they're embarrassed to cause a scene, so they do nothing," says Nashoba Valley Medical Center Cardiologist John Carr, MD. "Even people who've already had a heart attack may not recognize their symptoms, as each attack can be dramatically different."

*Here are some steps to help you in becoming heart smart:*

**Know the signs.** Chest pain is the most common symptom, but someone having a heart attack may also have pain in the arms, back, neck, jaw or stomach; shortness of breath; and other symptoms such as nausea or light-headedness. He or she may even break out in a cold sweat.

**Pick up the phone immediately.** Even if the person assures you it's not a heart attack, call 911 within the first five minutes of the attack. The faster you move, the faster your loved one will receive treatment, and many heart attack treatments work best when given within an hour of the attack.

**Get a ride.** You're better off taking an ambulance than driving the person to the hospital because emergency workers can start treatment on the way to the hospital, re-start the heart if it stops beating, and relay

the patient's information to the emergency department before you get there.

**Ask about medication.** Some people with a heart condition carry nitroglycerin pills to be taken in case of a heart attack. And some doctors recommend chewing an aspirin during a heart attack. Don't put off calling for emergency help to offer these pills, but ask the person on the phone if you should give the person either drug.

"Often times, those having a heart attack wait too long to get medical help. That delay can lead to serious heart damage and even death," explains Adam Cerel, MD, another cardiologist at the medical center. "If you're with someone who you suspect is having a heart attack, you need to take action quickly."

## How Heart Attack Symptoms Differ in Men and Women

When it comes to heart attack symptoms, men and women share several similarities. Similarities in symptoms include:

- Discomfort or pain in the center of the chest – many times, it feels like pressure or squeezing that may last a long time, or go away and come back
- Discomfort or pain in the jaw, arms, back, neck, or stomach
- Shortness of breath with or without chest pain
- Cold sweat
- Nausea or vomiting
- Lightheadedness
- A fear of impending doom or death

Women often have other, more subtle symptoms that may seem confusing, and not so obvious. Other common symptoms in women may include:

- Extreme fatigue, which may occur days or weeks in advance
- Pressure or pain in the lower chest, upper abdomen, or upper back
- Lightheadedness, which may lead to fainting

## After a Heart Attack – Nashoba Valley Medical Center's Cardiac Rehabilitation Program

Cardiac rehabilitation is a coordinated, multidisciplinary medical program aimed at optimizing short- and long-term outcomes for patients following a cardiovascular event. Benefits from cardiac rehabilitation, specifically for patients with heart disease, include improvements in exercise capacity, heart functions, and quality of life, as well as a decrease in re-hospitalization.

At Nashoba Valley Medical Center's Cardiac Rehabilitation Program, physicians prescribe exercise training, structured education classes and nutritional support. Participants are closely monitored by



experienced nurses and are encouraged to attend two to three hour-long classes per week; up to 36 visits per cardiac event. The program's goals are to optimize a patient's physical, psychological and social functioning.

"Along with the exercise components of the program, I found the educational sessions to be very enlightening, especially for people after having gone through some type of cardiac episode," says Bob Conlon, who participated in the Cardiac Rehabilitation Program after he experienced a mild heart attack in 2007 and currently attends the maintenance cardiac rehab program once a week. "I've stuck with this program for the length of time I have because it provides me with an opportunity for supervised exercise and the staff is so experienced, knowledgeable, can answer any questions I have, and they provide a relationship of trust."

**Learn more about Nashoba's Cardiac Rehabilitation Program by calling 978-784-9543 or visit [www.nashobamed.org/Car-Pul](http://www.nashobamed.org/Car-Pul).**