

What's Causing My Chest Pain?

This handout provides some information to help you figure out whether your chest pain could be **cardiac** (related to your heart) or **non-cardiac** (not related to your heart).

Why does chest pain happen?

Cardiac chest pain (also called angina)	Non-cardiac chest pain (NCCP)
Chest pain happens when plaque builds up in your heart arteries, preventing oxygen-rich blood from reaching part of your heart's muscle tissue.	The most common causes of NCCP are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muscle strain or over-use • Acid reflux or other stomach problems • Anxiety • Inflammation (swelling, redness, heat) around your ribs • Inflammation in the lining of the lungs (pleurisy) • Fibromyalgia (pain and tenderness all over the body)

What does the pain feel like?

Cardiac chest pain (also called angina)	Non-cardiac chest pain (NCCP)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In some people, the feeling may not be recognized as pain, but rather a dull aching, tightness, pressure, or squeezing across the chest. You may also feel tired, short of breath, sick to your stomach, sweaty, skipping or racing heart beats, or light-headed. Women and people assigned female at birth are more likely to have symptoms that include shortness of breath, fatigue (tiredness), and insomnia (problems sleeping). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Muscle pain: In some people the pain is sharp, shooting, achy, or tender to the touch. Acid reflux: Most commonly the pain is a burning sensation, and you may notice a sour taste in your mouth. Anxiety: Pain is often sharp, ongoing pain triggered by worries or a stressful situation. Inflammation around ribs, in the lining of your lungs, or fibromyalgia: Sudden, sharp chest pain or discomfort.

Where is the pain located?

Cardiac chest pain (also called angina)	Non-cardiac chest pain (NCCP)
<p>You'll usually feel the pain in your chest, but you may also feel it in your arms, neck or throat, jaw, shoulders, back, or upper stomach area.</p>	<p>The pain can be anywhere, but if you can locate the pain in one small area (smaller than a dime), it is usually not your heart.</p>

When does the pain happen?

Cardiac chest pain (also called angina)	Non-cardiac chest pain (NCCP)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Heart pain may get worse with exercise, too much physical effort, coming into contact with cold air, stress, eating, or smoking. Pain can happen even at rest. The pain may go away and come back. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Muscle pain is often caused by physical activity, after repetitive activity or exercise, or after an activity that you don't regularly do. Acid reflux starts after meals. Lung or rib pain happens when you take a deep breath, or after coughing.

How long does the pain last?

Cardiac chest pain (also called angina)	Non-cardiac chest pain (NCCP)
The pain usually lasts a few minutes (less than 20-30 minutes).	If the pain lasts only a few seconds, or if it lasts more than a couple hours, it is usually NCCP.

Does the discomfort come from exercise or physical activity?

Cardiac chest pain (also called angina)	Non-cardiac chest pain (NCCP)
Cardiac chest pain usually starts with exercise, everyday physical activity, or stress.	Muscle pain often starts hours or days after physical activity, or it can start suddenly if it is related to an injury.

How is the pain relieved?

Cardiac chest pain (also called angina)	Non-cardiac chest pain (NCCP)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rest. • Under the tongue (sublingual) nitroglycerin pills will likely relieve, or at least improve, heart-related pain. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muscle pain: Over-the-counter pain relievers (ibuprofen or acetaminophen), heat or ice, or massage. • Acid reflux: Over-the-counter antacids (like Tums® or famotidine/Pepcid®). • Anxiety: Deep breathing or anxiety medication.

When should I be most concerned that my chest pain could be related to my heart?

Cardiac chest pain (also called angina)	Non-cardiac chest pain (NCCP)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you have a family history of heart disease (coronary artery disease, or plaque or blockages in the arteries of your heart) • If you had a heart attack, a procedure to place stents in your heart, or coronary artery bypass graft surgery • If you smoke 	<p>If your pain is reproducible (meaning it's pain that doctors can cause by touching your chest area), or if it gets better or worse by changing the position of your body, it is usually not your heart.</p>

Cardiac chest pain (also called angina)	Non-cardiac chest pain (NCCP)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If you have diabetes, high blood pressure, or high cholesterol 	

When do I need to get emergency help?

Call 911 immediately if you have new pain, discomfort, squeezing, fullness, or pressure in your chest with any of the following symptoms:

- Pain in 1 or both arms, back, shoulders, neck, or jaw
- Shortness of breath or trouble breathing
- Feeling light-headed, dizzy, or breaking out in a cold sweat
- Stomach pain, bloating, or diarrhea
- Extreme fatigue (tiredness)
- Racing heart (fast heartbeat) even when resting
- Fainting or passing out

These signs and symptoms are serious and need to be treated right away.

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