Chest Discomfort: Cardiac or Muscular?

Why does chest discomfort occur?

Cardiac
- It occurs when a blockage in an artery prevents oxygen-rich blood from reaching part of the heart's muscle tissues.

Muscular
- It occurs as a result of muscle strain or over-use. Symptoms follow physical exertion, such as exercise.

What does the pain feel like?

Cardiac
- In some people the feeling may not be perceived as pain, but rather as a sensation or tightness across the chest, which is dull, aching, or squeezing.
- It can go along with shortness of breath, sweating, or feelings of clamminess, nausea, indigestion, and/or palpitations.

Muscular
- In some people the pain is sharp, shooting or achy. The sore area may also be tender to touch.

Where is the pain located?

Cardiac
- In many people the chest discomfort may radiate to the neck, jaw, arms, shoulders, throat, back, and upper abdominal region.

Muscular
- It is located anywhere on the body: arms, legs, abdomen, shoulders, chest, back, or neck.
When does the pain occur?

Cardiac
- It may be aggravated by exercise, exertion, exposure to the cold air, stress, eating, smoking, or may occur at rest.

Muscular
- It most often occurs after movement that requires unusual exertion or activities not performed on a regular basis. It can be hours after exercise or the next day.

How long does the pain last?

Cardiac
- Usually lasts a few minutes, rarely over 20-30 minutes.

Muscular
- Shooting pain may be fleeting; however, complete muscle soreness may last a few days

Does the discomfort come from exertion?

Cardiac
- Cardiac chest pain originates with exercise, everyday activity, or stress.

Muscular
- Muscle soreness is not predictable, but can be reproduced.

Does massaging the area lessen the pain?

Cardiac
- Cardiac pain does not change with massage.

Muscular
- Musculoskeletal discomfort may feel better or worse with massage.
Does the pain change while taking a deep breath or exhaling?

Cardiac
- Cardiac pain does not change during deep breathing.

Muscular
- Deep breathing can cause sharp, shooting pain (if the discomfort starts in the muscle).

How is the pain relieved?

Cardiac
- Sublingual Nitroglycerin pills will likely relieve or at least improve heart-related pain.

Muscular
- Muscle pain might be relieved with Advil, Motrin, ice, heat, massage or rest.