I have chest pain but it is not a heart attack- what is it?

If you are experiencing symptoms such as chest pain, pain going down your left arm, shortness of breath along with feelings of nausea, fatigue, dizziness or breaking out in a cold sweat, you could be having a heart attack. The best action is to contact your doctor or emergency services immediately.

However once you have been cleared of any serious heart ailments, you may still experience the chest pain. There are as many as 400 different causes of chest pain. Cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, psychological, musculoskeletal, pulmonary problems can all cause different types of chest pain and symptoms which mimic heart attacks.

In this article we will explain just a few of the more common causes.

Problems with your digestive system such as gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) or heartburn can mimic a heart attack. Pain with heart burn is caused by the stomach acid coming up from the stomach into the oesophagus. Heartburn is a sharp pain which can be aggravated after eating spicy or fatty food and then lying down. The difference between GERD and a heart attack is that GERD can be eased by taking an antacid such as Gaviscon or Tums.

A panic attack or an anxiety attack can mimic a heart attack. The bad news is that there is no clear way to differentiation between a heart attack and a panic attack. The classic symptoms of chest pains, palpitations and breathlessness can be experienced while having a panic attack. During a panic attack it is more the anxiety which cause the tightness in the chest which leads to the pain felt in the chest.

Pneumonia or pleuritis (inflammation of the pleura surrounding your lungs) will also have symptoms such as chest pain and shortness of breath. The chest pain will however be worsened with taking a deep breath or coughing. Consult your doctor if you are experiencing these symptoms.

A trigger point in the scalene muscles will cause pain the in chest. However this pain is a “two finger” projection into your chest and not a dull ache surrounding the whole chest. It will also cause pain between your shoulder blades and sometimes there is a numbness and tingling experienced into your thumb and index finger. The Scalene trigger points can cause breathing difficulties as hyperventilation breathing can activated these trigger points. By treating these trigger points and controlling your breathing pattern, the chest pain and breathlessness will dissipate.
A trigger point in pectoralis major or pectoralis minor muscle can cause chest pain, pain in the front of your shoulder and down the left arm to your elbow. However you might also experience pain into your ring, pinkie fingers and between your shoulder blades. A trigger point in pectoralis major will cause pain to increase when you move your arms and you will feel a tightness when opening up your arms wide e.g. hugging. This can be treated by your nearest physiotherapist who will release the trigger point and give you some stretches and strengthening exercises.

Thoracic Outlet Syndrome (TOS) is a caused by compression or irritation to the nerves or blood vessels in the upper chest region. TOS can cause pain in the chest which can sometimes mimic a heart attack. However with TOS the pain will increase with raising the affected arm i.e. hanging out washing or drying your hair and walking has no effect on the pain compared to the pain of angina. Treatment will include physiotherapy: to increase the range of motion of the neck and shoulders and to strengthen the muscles and correct your posture. Medication for pain relief can be prescribed.

Chest pain can be scary no matter what the cause. If you have been cleared of any heart or lung problems but you are still experiencing chest pain, your physiotherapist can help to diagnose and treat your chest pain.

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