



Living with angina (chest pain)

What is angina?

Angina pectoris is the medical name for a type of chest pain caused by the heart. It is a signal that the heart muscle is not getting enough blood and oxygen. It is usually known as angina.

What causes angina?

Angina is caused by a narrowing or blockage of the blood vessels that supply the heart muscle with blood and oxygen.

The heart muscle needs blood and oxygen just like any other part of the body. The blood vessels feeding the heart muscle are called the **coronary arteries**. When these arteries become narrowed or blocked by a fatty buildup, the muscle of the heart is starved for oxygen. This causes chest pain or angina.

What does angina feel like?

Angina feels a little different for each person. In general, angina starts in the middle of the chest or the left side of the chest. It may spread up to the neck and jaw, down the arms, or into the back. Angina often feels like a pressing, crushing, or squeezing pain. It is not a sharp or stabbing pain. It could feel like heartburn.

In some people, angina can cause sweating, tiredness, shortness of breath, or nausea. Some people have no pain at all.

Is angina the same as a heart attack?

No. Angina happens when the heart muscle is not getting enough blood for a **short** period of time. In a heart attack, part of the heart muscle goes without blood for a **long** period of time. That part of the heart muscle dies. A heart attack often occurs when a narrowed artery becomes completely blocked often with a blood clot.

An attack of angina usually lasts for less than 5 minutes. But it can go from less than 30 seconds to more than 30 minutes.

If the attacks become more painful, happen more often, or last longer, contact your doctor right away.

Note: Not all chest pain is angina. Check with your doctor to be sure.

What can set off an angina attack?

Chest pain usually happens when your heart has to work harder than normal. Find out what triggers your angina. For many people, these triggers are

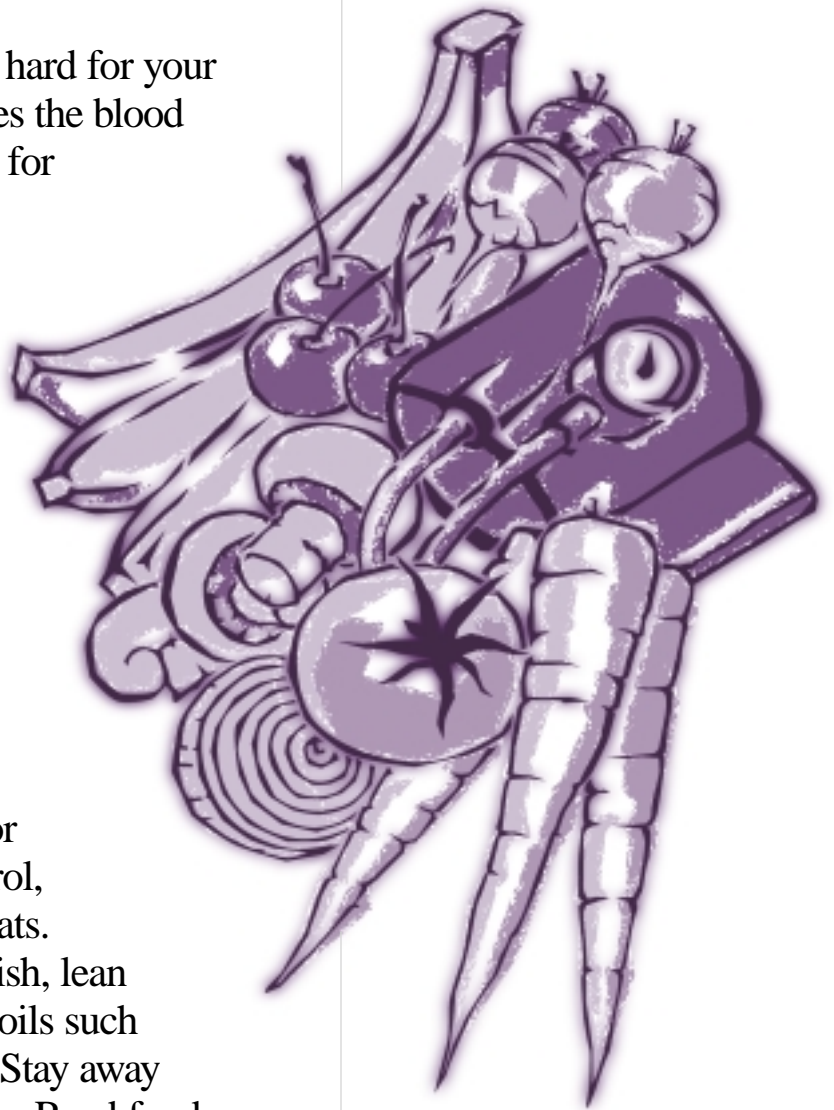
- physical activity—climbing stairs, carrying groceries, mowing the lawn, shoveling snow
- stress, strong emotion—having an argument
- heavy meals
- extreme heat or cold
- alcohol
- smoking

How can I keep an angina attack from starting?

- Sometimes, you know the kinds of activities that will bring on chest pain. This could be walking up stairs, eating, carrying something heavy, or having sex. You may be able to take nitroglycerin before you do these activities and prevent an angina attack. Ask your doctor if you can take nitroglycerin to prevent chest pain.
- Slow down and take breaks during your activities.

What can I do to manage angina over the long run?

- **Stop smoking.** Smoking can make it hard for your blood to carry oxygen. Nicotine makes the blood vessels narrow. It also makes it easier for blood to form clots that can block arteries. Ask your doctor about the best way to stop smoking.
- **Manage your blood pressure.** Take your medications as they are ordered, cut back on the salt or sodium in your food, lose weight if you need to, be more physically active, limit your alcohol, and stop smoking.
- **Know your cholesterol number.** If your cholesterol is high, your doctor may want you to lower your cholesterol, and eat foods that are low in animal fats. Choose skim or 1% dairy products, fish, lean meat, poultry with the skin removed, oils such as olive, canola, corn, and sunflower. Stay away from egg yolks, butter, and fried foods. Read food labels. Eat more fruits, vegetables, and fiber. They may help lower your cholesterol.
- **Lose weight if you need to.** It can take the strain off your heart and lower your blood pressure, too. Cut the amount of food you eat and increase your activity.
- **Ask your doctor how much alcohol is safe to drink.**
- **Control your diabetes.** If you have diabetes, work with your doctor to keep your blood sugar under control. Find a diabetes education class to help you learn more about managing diabetes.



- **Find ways to manage your stress.** Studies show that people who have coronary artery disease and are angry, worried, and depressed have more trouble with angina.
- **Get advice about exercise.** Exercise can help manage your weight, diabetes, stress, and high blood pressure, but it can also cause angina. Talk with your health care provider about starting to exercise. Start slowly and at a comfortable level. Work hard enough to feel you are working, but don't work so hard that you are short of breath.

What do I need to know about medicine for angina?

There are several different kinds of drugs that are used to manage angina. They work in various ways.

1. Nitrates relax your blood vessels and let more blood flow through. (**Nitroglycerin** is a nitrate.) They come in pills you can swallow, patches or paste you can put on your skin, or sprays and tablets you put under your tongue. Some work quickly for a short period of time, and some work more slowly over a longer period of time.
2. **Beta blockers** and **calcium channel blockers** slow the heart and make it beat with less force. This takes the strain off the heart.
3. The lipid-lowering drugs decrease the amount of cholesterol in your blood. Sometimes exercise and eating low-fat foods are not enough to lower your cholesterol.

Note: Some angina medicines can give you a headache. They can also make you dizzy. Take your time when you stand up. If lying down, sit up slowly and move your feet. Stand up slowly.

Talk with your health care provider about any medication problem you are having.