



HEART ATTACK— OR HEARTBURN?

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THE DIFFERENCE SO
GET IT CHECKED

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—ALEXANDER ROSEMURGY M.D.

WHAT WE CALL HEARTBURN HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH your heart. It's really acid reflux, a common condition that develops when digestive acids flow out of the stomach, which is designed to handle acid, into the esophagus, which is not. The acid burns, and because the esophagus and heart are close neighbors, the resulting pain in the chest is often mistaken for heart pain. Sometimes people think they are having a heart attack and rush to the emergency room.

The opposite mistake is also made: People experiencing angina—heart pain—think it's just acid indigestion and *fail*

to rush to the emergency room. And that can be a big problem.

Doctors at Florida Hospital see both kinds of situations in Tampa Bay, and it's important for you to know what to do in the event of chest pain. In fact, it can make a life-or-death difference. So if you're having chest pain of any kind, don't let embarrassment or uncertainty stop you. Go to an emergency room and get checked out.

In 2014, Florida Hospital handled more than 200,000 emergency room visits in the Tampa Bay area. The ER physicians in these hospitals are all board-certified in

Emergency Medicine, but even they have to do formal tests to make a formal diagnosis. The reason has to do with basic anatomy. The nerves in your chest are distributed in such a way that it is difficult to determine where the pain is coming from, says Wenzel Tirheimer, M.D., Florida Hospital Medical Director at one of the largest Emergency Departments in Tampa Bay. Pain from many points of origin—including the appendix, the gallbladder and the rest of the gastrointestinal tract—may appear in different locations in different people and therefore can be hard to pin down without further testing.

“The symptoms of multiple medical problems are often related and overlap,” Dr. Tirheimer explains.

MANY KINDS OF CHEST PAIN

There is a distinct diagnosis called noncardiac angina, or chest pain not due to heart problems. “This is a real identifiable issue,” says Alexander Rosemurgy M.D., a nationally recognized gastrointestinal surgeon specializing in minimally invasive and robotic surgery at Florida Hospital. It has other possible causes besides acid reflux, such as esophageal spasm, pneumonia or some types of ulcers. But they can all feel like cardiac discomfort. “Even people who have had a heart attack often can’t distinguish the difference,” says Dr. Rosemurgy.

These two physicians in different fields

agree about the importance of getting chest pain checked out right away. “A heart attack can present itself in many different ways,” Dr. Rosemurgy says. “You need to treat any chest pain seriously.”

DON'T JUST WAIT

That means calling 911 or having someone else drive you to an ER. “Go and be seen by a doctor rather than sitting home waiting and hoping,” Dr. Tirheimer says. “If it is a heart attack, the faster you’re treated, the better your odds of a full recovery.”

Conversely, learning that your pain is not heart-related will be a huge relief. “If I can tell a patient, ‘It seems more like your stomach or gallbladder, and not anything life-threatening,’ that’s a big reduction in their anxiety level,” Dr. Tirheimer says.

Once a heart problem is ruled out, doctors can find out what is causing the pain. Tests depend on the symptoms, health history, age and other factors. Some patients are admitted to the hospital for observation and further testing, while others are sent home with follow-up instructions. But stay attuned to your symptoms. “If your first doctor doesn’t see anything and you go home but feel worse, come back,” Dr. Tirheimer says. “Sometimes it isn’t until later that a disease declares itself.”

Your first move with chest pain should be to seek immediate medical attention. Says Dr. Rosemurgy: “It’s always better to be safe than sorry.”

HEART ATTACK CAN BE DIFFERENT IN WOMEN

As with men, the most common heart attack symptom in women is chest pain or discomfort. But, according to the American Heart Association, women are more likely than men to experience other symptoms, including:

- shortness of breath
- pressure or pain in the lower chest or upper abdomen
- dizziness, lightheadedness or fainting
- upper back pressure
- nausea, cold sweat or vomiting
- extreme fatigue.

Unfortunately, women often delay getting attention for themselves. In fact, the AHA also reports that 81 percent of women said they would call 911 for someone else showing heart-attack signs, while only 65 percent would call for themselves.

HOW TO AVOID REFLUX

If your chest discomfort turns out to be heartburn rather than a cardiac problem, that’s a relief, because heartburn is much less dangerous. But it’s still troublesome, as reflux (GERD) can lead to esophageal cancer. Try these simple steps to reduce the occurrence of acid reflux:

- Avoid alcohol, cigarettes, aspirin/anti-inflammatories and citrus.
- Raise the head of your bed about six inches; this lets gravity help keep your stomach acids down.
- Don’t eat close to bedtime or late at night.
- Try some over-the-counter antacids.

If symptoms persist, see your doctor.

Source: American Heart Association

