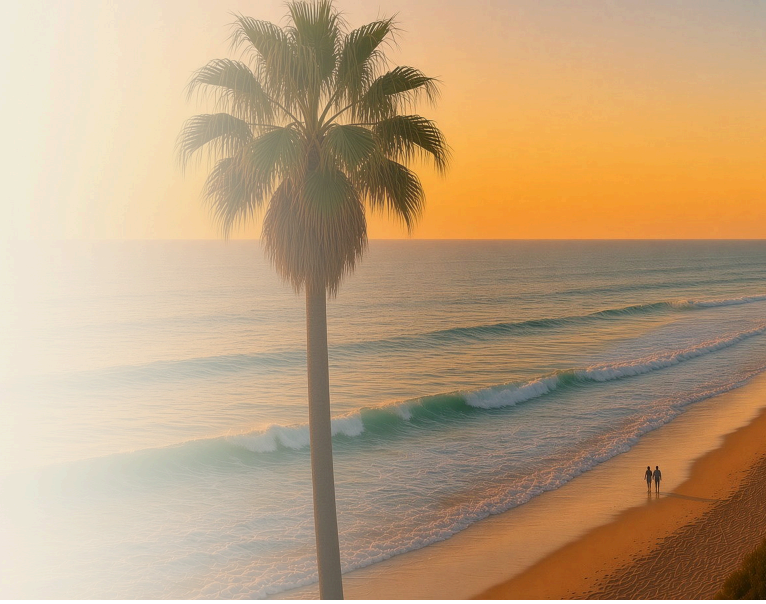
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Chest Pain When to Worry

How heart pain usually feels, how fast to act and when to call 911. Getting checked isn't overreacting, even if it's fine.

15 min

Chest pain at rest that lasts more than 15 minutes means call 911

90 min

the goal from ER arrival to the cath lab table when an artery is fully blocked, because time saves muscle

60%+

of women under 55 with a heart attack had at least one symptom that wasn't chest pain

WHAT HEART PAIN USUALLY FEELS LIKE

Know the classic pattern

Pressure, squeezing or heaviness
In the middle of the chest, sometimes a little to the left. Some people feel only a fullness or discomfort they can't quite name.

Brought on by effort
Stairs, a hill or carrying groceries bring it on, often at the same effort each time. It usually eases within a few minutes of rest.

It can spread
To the jaw, neck, one or both arms, the upper back or the upper belly. It can feel like a toothache or indigestion.

Easy to miss
Women, people with diabetes and older adults may have only jaw or back pain, nausea, fatigue, breathlessness or confusion.

A sharp pain lasting a second or two, pain you can bring back by pressing on your chest wall and burning after meals usually come from the chest wall or reflux. None of these is a guarantee, so new chest pain still deserves a checkup.

IN THE EMERGENCY ROOM

How the ER sorts out chest pain

Five things go into it

- **H** History
- **E** EKG
- **A** Age
- **R** Risk factors
- **T** Troponin

The score, from 0 to 10

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Low, 0 to 3
under 1% chance of a major heart event in six weeks, often home with follow-up

Intermediate, 4 to 6
usually more tests before going home, such as a stress test or coronary CT angiogram

High, 7 to 10
usually admitted for further testing or treatment

Within minutes you'll get an EKG and a blood test for **troponin**, a protein injured heart muscle leaks into the blood. A normal EKG, a normal high-sensitivity troponin at zero and one hour and a low HEART score together rule out a heart attack with very high confidence.

When in doubt, go

Going to the ER and hearing it isn't your heart often costs just a few hours and a copay. Staying home with a heart attack can cost far more.

HOW FAST TO ACT

Call 911, go in today or book a visit

CALL 911 NOW

don't drive yourself

Lasts over 15 minutes	Chest pain at rest that lasts more than 15 minutes.
Other symptoms with it	Sweating, nausea or vomiting, shortness of breath, lightheadedness, or feeling like you might pass out.
It spreads	Pain that travels into your jaw, neck or arm.
Severe or tearing	Severe pain, or tearing pain, especially if it goes through to your back.
More warning signs	Pain that wakes you from sleep, or comes with a sense of doom, a racing or pounding heartbeat or fainting.
Past heart problems	Chest pain that could be a heart attack when you've had heart problems before. If you have nitroglycerin, take one dose. Call 911 if the pain isn't better or is worse after 5 minutes.

GO TO THE ER OR URGENT CARE WITHIN HOURS

New pain with risk factors	You're over 50, or you have diabetes, high blood pressure, a smoking history or a family history of early heart disease.
A changing pattern	Pain that's more frequent, more severe, easier to bring on or coming on with less effort than before. The change is the clue.

SEE YOUR DOCTOR PROMPTLY

the same week

New pain with effort	New pain that comes on with exertion and goes away with rest. This pattern, called stable angina, starts with an EKG. If you can't get one that day, go to the ER.

BOOK A VISIT WITHIN DAYS

Brief and gone	Short, unusual chest discomfort that goes away on its own.
Clear non-heart features	Discomfort that keeps coming back but changes with position, hurts when you press on the spot or follows meals.
With anxiety	Chest tightness with anxiety and no other heart risk factors. Get a heart evaluation at least once.
Not sure	Chest discomfort you're trying to make sense of.
After a normal ER visit	The ER is good at ruling out a heart attack today. See your doctor afterward to check your long-term risk.

WHY CALL AN AMBULANCE

Paramedics can run an EKG in your living room and call ahead so the cath lab team is ready. As you wait, chew 324 mg of aspirin (four 81 mg baby aspirin) unless you're allergic, have a bleeding problem or a doctor told you not to.

READ THE FULL ARTICLE

damianrasch.com/chest-pain-cardiac

For education only, and not a substitute for advice from your own physician. Sources include the 2021 AHA/ACC chest pain guideline, the HEART score validation study (International Journal of Cardiology 2013), Twerenbold et al. on high-sensitivity troponin (JACC 2017) and the VIRGO study (JAMA Internal Medicine 2015).

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