



HEALTH Tips

Heart Attacks: Hidden Symptoms and Silent Damage

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Heart attacks (myocardial infarction) are a well-known health emergency, but many are unaware of all the symptoms of a cardiac event or that heart attacks can occur without any symptoms. Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States, accounting for over 650,000 deaths in 2005.¹ In 2006, heart disease-related costs such as health care services, medications, and lost productivity totaled over \$258 billion. Thus employers are focusing on preventing heart attacks to avoid this costly health problem.²

Heart attacks are caused by a blockage within a coronary artery. The blockage stops blood and oxygen flow to the heart muscle, which can cause heart tissue damage and death. Understanding heart attack symptoms can improve health outcomes by speeding the administration of clot-busting drugs and other artery-opening medications. Receiving medical attention within the first hour of a heart attack is critical. The heart is at its greatest risk of stopping suddenly and clot-busting drugs work best when administered at this time. To ensure timely treatment, everyone should know the signs and symptoms of a heart attack for men and women.

Common signs and symptoms of a heart attack include:

- Pressure, fullness or a squeezing pain in the center of your chest that lasts for more than a few minutes.
- Pain extending beyond your chest to your shoulder, arm, back, or even to your teeth and jaw.
- Increasing episodes of chest pain.
- Prolonged pain in the upper abdomen.
- Shortness of breath.
- Sweating.
- Impending sense of doom.
- Fainting.
- Nausea and vomiting.

Signs and symptoms of a heart attack in women may be different or less noticeable than heart attack symptoms in men. In addition to the symptoms above, heart attack symptoms in women can include:

- Abdominal pain or "heartburn"
- Clammy skin
- Lightheadedness or dizziness
- Unusual or unexplained fatigue

Source: Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. *Heart Attack: Signs and Symptoms*. Available at: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/heart-attack/DS00094/DSECTION=2>. Accessed May 30, 2008.

Unfortunately, some heart attacks occur with no symptoms at all. Silent ischemia, an event in which blood flow is restricted to the heart caused by clogged arteries, affects three to four million Americans each year without their awareness.³ Individuals who experience silent ischemic episodes can later have a serious heart attack without warning and are at an increased risk for dementia.⁴ Those with a history of diabetes or previous heart attacks are the most at risk. A simple exercise stress test administered by a physician can diagnose this problem.

What Employers Can Do

- Educate employees about steps they can take to reduce their risk of a heart attack and improve employees health with wellness programs and your health plan targeting these factors^{5, 6}:
 - Deciding not to smoke – Provide smoking cessation benefits and a tobacco-free workplace.
 - Choosing good nutrition – Ensure healthy dining options are available and cover nutrition counseling.
 - Reducing bad cholesterol and raising good cholesterol – Provide cholesterol screenings on-site and cover medications in full or with a nominal copayment.
 - Lowering blood pressure – Provide blood pressure screenings on-site and cover medications in full or with a nominal copayment.
 - Being physically active – Offer an incentive for using a health club, participating in an exercise or weight management program, or the purchase and use of a piece of home exercise equipment.
 - Aiming for a healthy weight – Screen for obesity and provide nutrition education, diet and exercise counseling, and behavioral strategies to help decrease obesity.
 - Managing diabetes – Implement education programs to teach employees about diabetes and cover medications in full or with a nominal copayment.
 - Reducing stress – Encourage employees to have a healthy work-life balance.
 - Limiting alcohol – Provide screening for alcohol dependence at no cost.
- Encourage the use of clinical preventive services by either covering benefits in full or with a nominal copayment.⁶ For more information about recommended preventive services, review the National Business Group on Health's publication: [A Purchaser's Guide to Clinical Preventive Services: Moving Science into Coverage](#).

References:

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6. Campbell KP, Lanza A, Dixon R, Chattopadhyay S, Molinari S, Finch RA, editors. *A purchasers guide to clinical preventive services: moving science into coverage*. Washington, DC: National Business Group on Health; 2006.