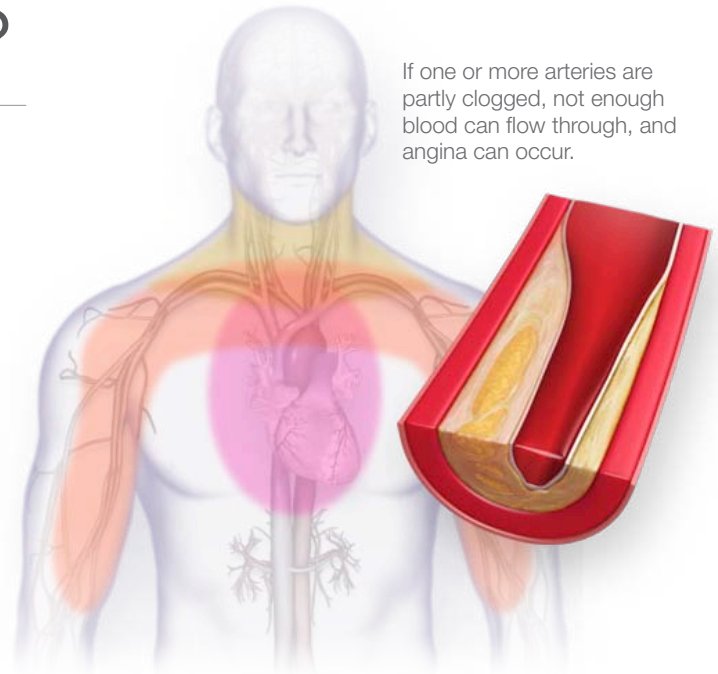# What Is Angina?

Angina is chest pain or discomfort that occurs when your heart doesn't get as much blood and oxygen as it needs. In angina, the need for increased blood flow isn't met for a short time. When increased demand for blood goes away, angina symptoms go away too.

Angina and heart attack have the same root cause: **atherosclerosis**. This is the buildup of fatty substances (plaque) in the coronary arteries. If one or more arteries are partly clogged, not enough blood can flow through, and you can feel chest pain or discomfort.

While the pain of angina may come and go, it's a sign of heart disease and can be treated. Lifestyle changes, medications, medical procedures and surgery can help reduce angina.

If one or more arteries are partly clogged, not enough blood can flow through, and angina can occur.

The figure above shows the pain areas most commonly associated with angina.

What does angina feel like?

Angina usually lasts for just a few minutes. Angina discomfort is usually in the center of the chest, behind the breastbone.

Here's how people say it feels:
• Chest feels tight or heavy.
• Feel short of breath (or hard to breathe).
• Pressure, squeezing or burning in chest.
• Discomfort may spread to arm, back, neck, jaw or stomach.
• Numbness or tingling in shoulders, arms or wrists.
• Sick to the stomach.

When will I get angina?

You may get angina when you...
• Climb stairs or carry groceries
• Feel angry or upset
• Work in very hot or cold weather
• Eat too much at one time
• Have sex
• Have emotional stress
• Exercise

What diagnostic tests might I have?

• Blood tests
• Electrocardiogram (EKG or ECG)
• Exercise stress test
• Cardiac catheterization
• Coronary angiogram

How is angina treated?

Your doctor may give you nitroglycerin. It is a

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medicine that relieves or prevents chest pain from angina.

Nitroglycerine:

• Comes as tiny tablets you put under your tongue.

• Is available in longer-acting forms as a spray, capsules, skin patches or ointment.

• Is inexpensive and acts quickly.

If you are taking nitroglycerin:

• Keep a fresh, sealed supply with you at all times.

• Always keep your tablets in their original bottle. Exposure to heat, light and air can make them less effective.

• Ask your doctor about refilling your prescription every six months. Old tablets can lose their strength.

Your doctor may tell you to take one just before starting an activity that's likely to cause chest pain. Also, you should take a tablet if you have discomfort that doesn't start to go away within a minute or two after you've stopped the activity, or if pain occurs when you aren't active.

What can I do about angina?

You can change your way of life and lower your chance of having angina attacks. A few simple steps may help you feel more comfortable every day:

• Stop smoking, and avoid second-hand smoke.

• Eat healthy meals low in saturated fat, *trans* fat, and salt.

• Control high blood pressure and blood cholesterol levels.

• Avoid extreme temperatures.

• Avoid strenuous activities.

• Learn to relax and manage stress.

• Call your doctor if your angina changes. For example, if you get angina while resting or if it ever gets worse.

HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

1 Call **1-800-AHA-USA1** (1-800-242-8721), or visit **heart.org** to learn more about heart disease and stroke.

2 Sign up to get *Heart Insight,* a free magazine for heart patients and their families, at **heartinsight.org**.

3 Connect with others sharing similar journeys with heart disease and stroke by joining our Support Network at **heart.org/supportnetwork**.

Do you have questions for the doctor or nurse?

Take a few minutes to write your questions for the next time you see your healthcare provider.

For example:

Can I exercise?

When should I call my doctor?

My Questions:

We have many other fact sheets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk, manage disease or care for a loved one. Visit **heart.org/answersbyheart** to learn more.

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