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Health Corner

I have chest pain – Do I dial 111 for an ambulance or take a few Panadol and have a rest?

Is it a sign I am having a heart attack? or am I having a sudden bout of indigestion from last night's curry? Nelly, a GP with many years experience, helps us answer some of these questions.

The information below is not meant to substitute a visit to your local health professional, but rather as a brief outline of some different presentations of chest pain and the potential action that may be taken by health professionals.

Geoff (aged 54) It's 8 in the morning, the pain started at 5am. I hoped it would go away. It's like a steam roller sitting on my chest. I feel nauseated. In the past I have experienced similar pain in my chest while playing tennis, but then that pain only lasted for a few minutes.
Nelly: Call an ambulance. Don't wait to see your local GP. This is very suspicious of a heart attack – Geoff's age, the type of pain, and the previous history of pain which sounds like it could have been angina. Geoff should have called the ambulance at 5am.

Joe (aged 59) A week ago I fell off a ladder and landed on my chest. Since then I have had a lot of pain in my chest. It still hurts to move and breathe. Mostly the pain is on the left side over my heart. I can't lie-down on my left side. I am concerned as it just does not want to get better. Aside from the pain in my chest I am feeling OK I guess, I am eating OK and managing to get by in my office job.
Nelly: It is common for people with an injury to their chest wall for the pain to get worse initially and only start to improve in the second week after the injury. If Joe is not short of breath or otherwise unwell, I might prescribe painkillers after having checked him out for other complications.

Violet (aged 75) My chest pain started yesterday. It makes me very short of breath. I have a fever and don't want to eat anything. I don't have a cough.
Nelly: Violet should go and see her local health professional right away. Even though she doesn't have a cough she could still have pneumonia (Lungenentzündung) possibly with Pleurisy (Brustfell-Entzündung). If she is very short of breath she should call an ambulance.

Andrew (24) I've had this pain in my chest for 4 hours. It feels like it is inside where my heart is. My left hand is tingling and I'm starting to panic because despite taking some very deep breaths, I can't get enough air in. I am going through a bad spell - yesterday my girlfriend called it quits, now I think I have a heart attack.

Nelly: Andrew needs to see a health professional. Despite the stress from his recent relationship break-up he might have a serious condition. He may also be hyperventilating. Hyperventilating means 'over-breathing'. Andrew's brain is telling him that he isn't getting enough oxygen, so he is breathing harder, this only makes it worse. Sometimes it can be associated with stress, but not always. The immediate course of treatment for Andrew is to relax and try to slow his breathing down. In times gone past we used to give people a paper bag to breath in and out of but nowadays this is not recommended. Instead, deliberately slowing breathing down helps to relieve the symptoms of panic as well as chest pain. It might be good for Andrew to see a Physiotherapist or Psychologist - they can help re-train breathing techniques.

Mavis (82) My chest pain started last night and has gotten steadily worse. It woke me up in the middle of the night. It's on the left side, the area is sore to touch. Today I noticed a rash there.
Nelly: This sounds a lot like Mavis has Shingles (Gürtelrose). Shingles is common in older people, although young ones and even children can get it too. It is debilitating in older people and the pain can last long after the rash has disappeared. There is a vaccine for Shingles and it is advised that people over the age of 60 talk to their GP about it. Mavis should go and see her GP.

Jane (24) It hurts to breathe and I am a little short of breath. A couple of days ago my boyfriend and I returned from a cycling competition in Switzerland. I had a fall when I was there but didn't think much of it at the time. Although I must have done some damage as my calf is sore and swollen.
Nelly: Given her age and relationship status Jane may be on the oral contraceptive pill and this combined with flying or other reasons to be immobile such as

an accident or illness increases her risk of developing a thrombosis, or blood clot, in the veins of the legs. The danger with blood clots are that they move into the lungs and cause a pulmonary embolus (Lungen-Embolie) - this is a life threatening condition. Jane should call an ambulance, or attend an emergency service urgently.

Tom (67) I have had chest pain for over 24 hours now. It's hard to tell whether it's in the chest or the upper tummy area. It's burning and I am burping a lot.
Nelly: Sometimes pain from a heart attack or angina feels like indigestion, and it can make people burp, so it is always best to check this out with your local health professional. Tom should see his GP today.

Laura (47) I woke up at midnight with severe cramping pain in my right lower chest and right shoulderblade. Last night I enjoyed a hearty 4 course meal at a restaurant with my girlfriends away from the kids. I was having such a good time I even made jokes about my GP who keeps telling me to lose weight. I have had similar pains like this in the past but never as bad as this.
Nelly: Laura should go to see her GP (although she doesn't need to tell her she made jokes about her). The pain Laura is experiencing is likely to be from a gallstone that is stuck. Her GP can prescribe something to help ease her pain. They will also suggest further tests and potentially an operation.

So to summarise: a pain in the heart does not always come from the heart and a heart attack can present with pain elsewhere. The best advice is this.... If you are in doubt - seek advice, your local health professional or GP is there to help.

By Nelly Steinemann

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