

What is Angina Pectoris?

Transcript

When the heart isn't getting enough blood it produces a chest pain called angina pectoris. Angina (AN-jih-na), or angina (an-JI-na) as it's sometimes called, is a serious condition, but there are steps you can take to treat angina, and maybe even keep it from occurring.

Normally angina starts as an aching, tightening or squeezing discomfort in the chest, that may spread to the neck, jaw, left arm or back. Other symptoms of angina can include: sweating, shortness of breath, indigestion, and nausea.

To better understand angina, let's look at the heart.

The heart is a muscle, and just like the other muscles in your body, it needs blood containing oxygen and nutrients to work properly. It gets it from large blood vessels, called coronary arteries.

The harder the heart pumps, the more oxygen-rich blood it needs. If the heart doesn't get enough oxygen, angina sets in.

The main cause of angina is coronary artery disease.

This disease causes fat and other materials, called plaque, to gradually build up on the walls of the coronary arteries. This narrows them, reducing the supply of blood to the heart.

There are two main types of angina: stable angina, and unstable angina.

Stable angina, the most common type, occurs at times when the heart needs more oxygen, and the reduced bloodflow cannot meet that demand.

Activities that can increase the heart's demand for oxygen include: certain physical activities, extreme temperatures, smoking, eating large meals, and stress and other emotions.

Unlike stable angina, unstable angina occurs without any cause or trigger. It may signal that the arteries have become so narrow that the heart cannot get enough blood, even at rest. Or that plaque on the walls of the arteries has broken off, causing a blockage.

Unstable angina needs to be treated right away. Otherwise, it can quickly lead to a heart attack, which can cause permanent heart damage.

Animation Copyright © 2008 Milner-Fenwick