Unstable angina: what is it?

Unstable angina is a medical emergency. It’s a bad pain in your chest that is a warning sign of a heart attack. There are good treatments for unstable angina, but if it happens it’s important to go to hospital straight away.

Here, we talk about the causes and symptoms of unstable angina. To learn more about treatments, see the leaflet Unstable angina: what treatments work?

What is unstable angina?

Unstable angina is a pain in your chest that happens if your heart is not getting enough oxygen. This pain:

- might come on suddenly
- might get worse over a short period
- is not caused by physical activity or is different to the type of pain usually caused by physical activity
- doesn’t get better with rest or painkillers
- is a warning sign of a heart attack.

You might never have had chest pain before. Or you might have had a type of chest pain called stable angina. Stable angina usually happens when you are active but it can also be caused by emotional stress. It lasts only a few minutes. For some people resting is enough to make it stop, but others also need to take their angina medicine. But unstable angina can happen any time, and it may not go away when you take medicine for stable angina.

If you get unstable angina it is an emergency. You should call the emergency services and get immediate medical help.
Most people get unstable angina because they have coronary artery disease. The coronary arteries carry blood and oxygen to the heart muscle. Coronary artery disease happens when clumps of fat build up on the lining of a coronary artery. Over time, they make the artery narrower.

If you have unstable angina, a clump of fat in one of your coronary arteries tears open. A blood clot forms over the tear to try to patch it up and partly blocks the artery. Not enough oxygen gets to your heart. This is what causes the pain.

The clot may get bigger. If it completely blocks the artery and no oxygen gets to your heart muscle, it's called a heart attack. This can permanently damage your heart.

**What are the symptoms?**

The main symptom of unstable angina is a bad pain in your chest. But it can come on in different ways.

Often, prolonged pain is the main symptom. Sometimes it may be a worsening of stable angina pain or a very bad new pain.

The pain of unstable angina can feel as if there’s a weight on your chest or like a squeezing, crushing, or gripping sensation. It usually lasts at least 20 minutes.

The feeling is usually in the middle of the chest. But you may get it in your neck and jaw, or in your back. It may go down one or both of your arms and make them feel heavy. You may get stomach pain or feel as if you have indigestion. You may get breathless and sweaty. Or you may feel sick or exhausted.

If you have unstable angina you should go to hospital for emergency treatment. The doctors will do tests, including an electrocardiogram (ECG) and blood tests, to see if your heart is beating properly, and to tell whether you are having unstable angina or a heart attack.

**What will happen to me?**

If you've had an attack of unstable angina, you may feel anxious about your future and worry that you could have a heart attack or die. But most people recover well. With the right treatment many people with unstable angina can keep doing the things they enjoy.

You should still be able to drive, as long as your angina is under control. You should check whether you need to tell your licensing authority (for example, the DVLA in the UK) and your motor insurance company.

Most people can still enjoy sex. But if you're taking medicines called nitrates for angina, you shouldn't take the anti-impotence medicines sildenafil (Viagra), tadalafil (Cialis), and vardenafil (Levitra).

Generally, if you have unstable angina or get frequent chest pains, then you should not fly. If you're not sure if flying is safe, talk to your doctor.
Having angina can also affect certain kinds of work. For example, you may no longer be able to do a job that involves running heavy machinery. Ask your doctor about this.

Having angina can affect some people’s quality of life. For example, you may worry so much about your condition that you can’t live life normally. If you are feeling very down or depressed, talk to your doctor. There are good treatments that can help.

**Where to get more help**

There are many charities and support groups to help people with heart conditions. For example, in the UK, the British Heart Foundation (http://www.bhf.org.uk) provides advice and support to people with heart conditions, including angina.