Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.

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Chest pain: is it just indigestion - or a heart attack?

NSW HEALTH DEPARTMENT

Chest pain:
is it just indigestion or a heart attack?

Fabio* was on his way home after lunch with friends when he felt a pain in the middle of his chest. At first he thought it was just indigestion, but by the time he arrived home the pain had spread to both his arms and he was perspiring and feeling faint.

"My wife took one look at me and wanted to call an ambulance. I told her not to bother - that I'd be okay after a rest," he says. "But she insisted on getting an ambulance and 20 minutes later I was in hospital."

His wife's fast action saved 45-year-old Fabio's life. The pain was the symptom of a heart attack caused when a clot formed in one of his arteries. This clot blocked the artery, cutting off the blood supply to his heart. But getting to hospital promptly meant doctors could use a special drug to dissolve the clot, allowing blood to flow back to his heart again. This prevented serious damage to Fabio's heart and gave him a good chance of recovering.

Because heart attacks are so common - and are the single biggest killer of both men and women under 70 - we should all be aware of the symptoms. The faster a person gets to hospital for treatment, the better their chances of survival. Although most hospitals will use the same life-saving drug that unblocked Fabio's arteries, there's also a newer technique available in some large hospitals. Instead of a drug, doctors use a special device to expand the artery and get blood flowing to the heart again. Another important reason to get to hospital quickly is that in some cases of heart attack, the heart can actualy stop, but with special equipment, it's possible to restart it again, using an electric shock.

The symptoms of heart attack can vary a lot, says Professor Terry Campbell of the National Heart Foundation. Often, as Fabio experienced, the pain can start in the chest and radiate to either the left or the right arm - or to both. sometimes it spreads up to the throat, jaw and even the teeth, or feel as if it's burrowing through to a person's back. Surprisingly, it's possible to feel pain in the arms or throat, for instance, but not in the chest itself. Some heart attack survivors also say they experience a feeling of pressure or a "tightening" in the chest rather than pain. Other symptoms can include feeling unwell, feeling giddy or faint, feeling anxious, sweating , vomiting or feeling nauseous. A person may also look pale and ill.

How can you tell the difference between heart attack symptoms and simple indigestion? Like a heart attack, indigestion can create a burning pain, but it's unlikely to spread to other parts of the body. But if you're in any doubt, don't hesitate to call an ambulance and say you're having chest pains, advises Professor Campbell - especially if you don't normally suffer indigestion. If it turns out to be a false alarm and you're not having a heart attack, don't worry - the hospital staff won't mind.
But besides knowing the symptoms of heart attack, it's also important to know how to prevent one - not smoking, getting regular exercise, eating plenty of cereals, grains, vegetables, fruit and avoiding fatty foods, and keeping blood pressure healthy can all help reduce the risk of heart disease.