

FREE PATIENT RESOURCE · ELINMED PREVENTIVE CARDIOLOGY

Heart Attack & Stroke Warning Signs

Know the Signs. Act Fast. Every Minute Matters.

■ If You Think Someone Is Having a Heart Attack or Stroke — Call 911 NOW

- Do not drive yourself to the hospital
- Do not wait to see if symptoms pass
- Chew one regular aspirin (325mg) if available and not allergic — while waiting for 911
- Time is muscle. Every minute of delay increases damage to the heart or brain

HEART ATTACK WARNING SIGNS

A heart attack (myocardial infarction) occurs when a coronary artery is blocked — usually by a ruptured plaque — cutting off blood supply to part of the heart. Symptoms may come on suddenly or build gradually.

Symptom	What It Feels Like	Important Notes
Chest pain / pressure	Pressure, squeezing, fullness, or crushing pain in center or left chest	May last minutes or come and go. Do not ignore.
Radiating pain	Pain spreading to left arm, shoulder, jaw, neck, or upper back	Arm or jaw pain alone — without chest pain — can be a heart attack.
Shortness of breath	Sudden difficulty breathing, with or without chest discomfort	Can occur before chest pain. May be the first or only symptom.
Cold sweat / nausea	Breaking into a cold sweat, nausea, or lightheadedness	Often dismissed as flu or anxiety. Context matters.
Unusual fatigue	Sudden extreme fatigue disproportionate to activity	Most commonly overlooked symptom — especially in women.

HEART ATTACK SYMPTOMS IN WOMEN — OFTEN DIFFERENT

Women are more likely to experience atypical heart attack symptoms and are more likely to attribute them to non-cardiac causes. This delays treatment and worsens outcomes.

Symptom	What It May Feel Like
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Unusual fatigue	Extreme, unexplained tiredness — sometimes days before the heart attack itself
Shortness of breath	Without chest pain or exertion
Nausea / indigestion	Often mistaken for gastrointestinal issues or anxiety
Upper back / jaw pain	Aching or pressure in these areas without obvious chest pain
Arm discomfort	In either arm, not just the left — or a general sense of heaviness
Sleep disturbance	Unusual insomnia in the nights before a cardiac event

- The key message for all women: Trust your body. If something feels wrong — even if it doesn't match the "classic" description — call 911. It is always better to be evaluated and reassured than to wait and be wrong.

STROKE WARNING SIGNS — USE "FAST"

A stroke occurs when blood flow to part of the brain is interrupted — either by a clot (ischemic, 87% of strokes) or a burst blood vessel (hemorrhagic). Like a heart attack, stroke is a time-critical emergency.

	Sign	What to Look For
F	FACE DROOPING	Ask the person to smile. Does one side of the face droop or go numb? An uneven smile is a warning sign.
A	ARM WEAKNESS	Ask them to raise both arms. Does one drift downward? Arm weakness or numbness — especially one-sided — is a stroke sign.
S	SPEECH DIFFICULTY	Ask them to repeat a simple sentence. Is speech slurred, garbled, or impossible? Sudden speech problems = stroke until proven otherwise.
T	TIME TO CALL 911	Note the time symptoms started — doctors need this. Call 911 immediately. Do not wait to see if symptoms improve.

Additional stroke warning signs:

- Sudden severe headache with no known cause — often described as 'the worst headache of my life'
- Sudden vision changes — blurred or double vision, or loss of vision in one or both eyes
- Sudden confusion or trouble understanding what people are saying
- Sudden dizziness, loss of balance, or difficulty walking or coordinating movement

WHAT TO DO WHILE WAITING FOR 911

Step	Action
1. Call 911 first	Do not attempt to drive. Ambulances can begin treatment en route and notify the hospital to prepare.
2. Chew aspirin	If not allergic and available — chew one regular aspirin (325mg) or four baby aspirins (81mg each). Do NOT swallow whole.
3. Stay calm and seated	Sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Loosen tight clothing.
4. Unlock the door	If alone, unlock your front door so paramedics can enter.
5. Call a family member	After calling 911 — let someone know what is happening.
6. Do NOT eat or drink	You may need emergency procedures that require an empty stomach.

- "The decision to call 911 immediately — instead of waiting and watching — is the single most important action a bystander or patient can take in a cardiac emergency." — Dr. Christabel Nyange, FACC, Founder of ElinMed