

Patient information from BMJ

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Stable angina: what is it?

If you have angina you might worry about how it will affect your life and what will happen. But there are treatments that can control angina attacks and help you stay active.

This information is about angina that is called stable because it has a regular pattern. It's the most common type of angina.

What is stable angina?

Angina is a pain in your chest that happens if your heart is not getting enough oxygen. People usually get angina because the arteries in their heart have become narrowed. This is caused by a build up of fat in the lining of the arteries.

If your arteries become too narrow your heart might not get enough blood. This is particularly a problem at times when your heart needs to work harder than usual. For example, if you are walking up a hill.

If your heart doesn't get enough oxygen to pump properly it can cause discomfort or pain. This is the pain you feel when you have an angina attack.

Things that can make your heart work harder and bring on an angina attack include:

- increased physical activity
- going out in cold weather
- feeling upset or excited.

Stable angina has a regular pattern. You get it when your heart is working harder than usual and it goes away if you rest or take your angina medication. You can learn to recognize the pattern.

Another type of angina is called **unstable angina**. If you have this type of angina you might get symptoms at any time, even when you're resting. There's no regular pattern to your symptoms and you might have bad pain that lasts longer.

Stable angina: what is it?

Having angina increases your chance of having a heart attack. So it's important to get treatment.

What are the symptoms of stable angina?

Stable angina affects people in different ways.

- Some people say it feels like a weight on their chest, or like a crushing sensation.
- You might have pain in your neck and jaw, or in your back.
- You might have pain down one or both arms.
- Some people feel sick to their stomach or exhausted or sweat more than usual.
- Sometimes being breathless is the only symptom.

Usually the discomfort goes away when you stop and rest. It lasts between one and three minutes. It might take longer to go away if you have been angry or upset.

If it lasts only a few seconds, or if it is a dull ache lasting for hours, it's probably not angina.

Your doctor may send you for tests to confirm if you have angina. You will probably have blood tests and an electrocardiogram (ECG) to look at your heart's rhythm. Or you may have a type of scan called an angiogram that checks the blood vessels around your heart. The tests may be done while you are walking on a treadmill to see how your heart responds to stress. You may hear this called a stress test.

Living with your angina

If you have angina it's normal to worry about how it will affect you.

There may be lifestyle changes you can make to help improve your heart health, and reduce your chances of a heart attack. For example, it will be important to control your blood pressure. You should take any blood pressure medications prescribed by your doctor. If you have diabetes you will need to be extra careful about managing your blood sugar levels. Not smoking and keeping your weight within a healthy range is also important.

Taking the right medications for your angina will be important. If you are given medication to help treat angina attacks when they happen, you will need to think about carrying it with you at all times. Your doctor will explain when and how to use it.

To read more about treatments for stable angina and ways to stay healthy, see our patient information *Stable angina: what are the treatment options?*

People with stable angina are often concerned about how it will affect day-to-day life. Your doctor will be able to advise you on whether you are able to do things such as work, drive, and travel.

Having angina might make you worry more, or make you feel down. This can affect your quality of life. If your mood is very low or you feel depressed, make sure you talk with your doctor. There are treatments that can help.

Stable angina: what is it?

What to look out for

It's important to recognize how your angina feels and what brings it on. You should tell your doctor about any changes in the pattern of your angina. For example, if the pain feels different or if you start to get it more often.

You should get medical help right away if your angina:

- lasts longer than usual
- comes on when you are resting
- is worse than usual.

These might be signs that your angina is becoming unstable.

If your angina doesn't go away after you've stopped what you are doing and taken a dose of your angina medication, you should call the emergency services. You could be having a heart attack.

There are organizations and charities that offer information and advice to people with stable angina. Ask your doctor about organizations where you live, or try searching online.

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