

What can your chest pain mean?

The condition can be a problem for both the young and young-at-heart

What does chest pain feel like, and how does one know it's not a panic attack? Head and consultant at Mount Alvernia Hospital's 24hr Clinic and emergency Services, Dr Oh Jen Jen, on how to tell the difference.

Q What does chest pain feel like?

A Chest pain, medically referred to as angina pectoris, may be described as sharp, pulling, stabbing, poking, burning or squeezing in nature. It may occur in isolation, or with symptoms such as cold sweat, shortness of breath, palpitations, giddiness, nausea, vomiting or loss of consciousness.

Chest pain should not be attributed to a panic attack — which can present symptoms very similar to a heart attack — unless you have been assessed by a doctor and more serious conditions have been excluded.

Q It is often linked to a heart attack, but is chest pain primarily heart-related?

A In the majority of cases, chest pain is not caused by heart disease. Some common causes of non-cardiac chest pain include muscle strain, inflammation of rib cage cartilage, gastric reflux or lung conditions such as pneumonia or pneumothorax (an abnormal collection of air lodged between the lung and its lining).



Chest pain can be a serious condition accompanied by risk factors such as diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Occasionally, chest pain may be due to conditions such as anaemia (low haemoglobin), pulmonary embolism (a blood clot in the arteries of the lungs), or aortic dissection (a tear of the main artery in the chest).

The risk of heart disease is higher in older people, smokers, and those with chronic medical conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and/or a strong family history of heart disease. If you have any of these risk factors and experience chest pain, it is best to seek medical attention and further evaluation.

Q When should medical attention be sought?

A If you have mild chest pain and no other symptoms such as cold sweat, shortness of

breath, palpitations, giddiness and vomiting, you can consult your family doctor or visit the polyclinic first, where a referral will be arranged for further evaluation and treatment.

If chest pain is severe and accompanied by the symptoms listed above, you should head immediately to the accident and emergency department of the nearest hospital. Do not drive or take public transportation — call 995 immediately.

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