A Higher Level of Care

#### Danbury Hospital Patient Education Sheet

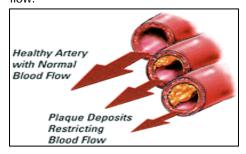
### What is Angina?

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Angina (angina pectoris) is temporary chest pain that occurs when the heart does not get enough oxygen. It may be a feeling of tightness, heaviness, dull discomfort, numbness, burning, pressure or crushing pain that is usually felt behind the breastbone. Some people may feel discomfort in the shoulders, arms, neck, jaw, teeth, or back. Others may feel as if they are having indigestion.

Angina may feel different in women than for men. Many times women present with symptoms of a burning sensation in the upper abdomen, upset stomach, lightheadedness, and sweating rather than chest pain. They may not recognize these symptoms as warning signs and may delay seeking medical help.

Angina is most often caused by blockages in the arteries that supply blood to the heart, the coronary arteries. This is called coronary artery disease, or heart disease. With heart disease, the coronary arteries harden and thicken over time from buildup of fat, cholesterol, and other substances, called plaque. This plaque causes the arteries to narrow, eventually blocking blood flow.



Conditions that increase your chances of heart disease include:

- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Smoking
- High cholesterol level
- Obesity
- Family history of heart disease

## What is stable and unstable angina?

Stable angina describes episodes of chest discomfort that are usually predictable. It will occur when a person is under physical, mental or emotional stress. Stable angina is relieved with rest and/or nitroglycerin.

Unstable angina is chest pain that is unexpected and will usually occur at rest. Unstable angina places one at risk for a heart attack, severe cardiac arrhythmias or sudden death and should be treated as an emergency.

# When are stable anginal episodes most likely to occur?

Episodes of angina occur when the heart needs more oxygen than what is available. In other words, the heart has to work harder during activities such as walking up a hill, eating a heavy meal, going out in hot or cold weather, or when reacting to stress.

An episode can last between 30 seconds and 30 minutes, but generally lasts for less than 5 minutes. A person with stable angina will eventually be able to recognize a pattern of when anginal episodes occur and how long their anginal episodes last.

### Is an anginal episode the same as a heart attack?

An anginal episode is not a heart attack. When a heart attack occurs, a portion of the heart receives little or no oxygen for a longer period of time and a portion of the heart muscle dies. Anginal pain is caused by a temporary lack of oxygen to the heart muscle and does not cause permanent damage. However, if angina is not treated, a heart attack could occur. Your physician should be notified when angina first develops or if the usual pattern of anginal episodes changes.

### What tests might the physician order?

- An electrocardiogram (ECG or EKG) may be ordered to look a the electric conduction or rhythm of your heart
- A stress test may be ordered to evaluate the workload on your heart during activity. This is done while you walk on a treadmill.
- A cardiac catheterization may be done. This
  is a test in which a catheter, or long thin tube
  is inserted into an artery in the arm or leg and
  then guided into the heart. Dye is injected
  into the arteries around the heart and x-rays
  are taken to view any possible blockages.

### How is angina treated?

Angina can be treated with nitroglycerin or other medications such as aspirin, beta-blockers or calcium channel blockers. The most effective treatment for reducing angina is a combination of medications, living a healthy lifestyle, and angioplasty and/or surgery when recommended by your physician. A healthy lifestyle includes:

- Regular moderate exercise under the guidance of your physician
- Eating a healthy diet rich in fresh fruits, vegetables, lean meats and low fat dairy products
- Limiting alcohol consumption
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Not smoking

# How can I tell if I am having unstable angina or a heart attack?

Because the symptoms of angina and heart attack are similar, it is important to report all new symptoms to your physician. Call 9-1-1 and go to the hospital emergency department if you are unsure if your pain is related to angina or a heart attack. In general, anginal pain will go away within 10 minutes after rest and taking prescribed nitroglycerin. Symptoms of a heart attack are stronger than those of angina. According to the American Heart Association, symptoms of a heart attack include the following:

- Uncomfortable pressure, fullness, squeezing, or pain in the center of the chest lasting more than a few minutes.
- Pain spreading to the shoulders, neck or arms. The pain may be mild or intense. It may feel like pressure, tightness, burning, or heavy weight. It may be located in the chest, upper abdomen, neck, jaw, or inside the arms and shoulders.
- Chest discomfort with lightheadedness, fainting, profuse sweating, nausea, or shortness of breath.
- Anxiety, nervousness and/or cold, sweaty skin.
- Paleness or pallor
- Increased or irregular heart rate
- A feeling of impending doom

If you have one or more of these symptoms, call 9-1-1 (the Emergency Medical Service, EMS) immediately. Remember, EMS is here to help you and to bring treatment to you. Many treatments are available that greatly improve chances of survival if they are given quickly after heart attack symptoms first appear. EMS can start those treatments even before you arrive at the hospital. *Do not drive yourself to the hospital if you think you are having a heart attack.* 

Source:

American Academy of Family Physicians www.familydoctor.org

American Heart Association @ www.americanheart.org

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