



## Recognizing Heart Attacks in Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (ID/DD)

*BQIS Fact Sheets provide a general overview on topics important to supporting an individual's health and safety and to improving their quality of life. This document provides general information on the topic and is not intended to replace team assessment, decision-making, or medical advice.*

### Intended Outcomes

Recognize the signs and symptoms of a heart attack and understand the importance of early recognition and treatment.

### Definitions

**Angina:** Chest pain that occurs when heart muscle cells are not getting enough blood and oxygen.

**Coronary Heart Disease (CHD) or Coronary Artery Disease (CAD):** A gradually developing state where the blood flow to the heart muscle is decreased due to narrowing of the coronary arteries.

**Heart Attack:** An event where an area of the heart muscle dies because the coronary arteries can't supply enough blood to the heart cells in that area. Often this happens when a blood clot blocks an artery that was already narrowed by plaque.

**Plaque:** A buildup of fatty substances and blood cells inside the walls of the arteries causing narrowing of arteries that decrease the blood flow or circulation.

### Facts

- Heart attacks can cause the heart to stop beating (cardiac arrest).
- Coronary heart disease is the number one cause of death in the United States.
- Both men and women are at risk to have heart attacks.
- Heart attacks are very uncommon in teenagers but increase in likelihood as people become adults.
- It is possible to calculate the risk of heart attack using medical information.
- It is common for people to delay seeking help and wait over two (2) hours after feeling the initial signs of a heart attack.



- Symptoms can be very gradual and can come and go.
- Fast action is critical during a heart attack. The faster treatment is started, the greater the chances are for recovery.
- Clot-busting drugs and other artery-opening treatments can possibly stop the damage of a heart attack.
- To be most effective, treatment needs to be given within one hour of the start of heart attack symptoms.

### Recommended Actions and Prevention Strategies

#### 1. Recognize signs and symptoms of a heart attack:

- Chest discomfort:
  - Discomfort in the center of the chest that may be described as pressure, squeezing, fullness, or pain.
  - Chest discomfort may last for more than a few minutes or go away and comes back.
  - Individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities (ID/DD) may grimace, rub their chest, or have a change in their usual desire to be active.
- Discomfort in other areas of the upper body:
  - Pain or discomfort in one or both arms (especially the left one), the neck, jaw, back, or upper stomach.
  - Individuals with ID/DD may rub the affected area or move it less than usual.
- Shortness of breath:
  - Individuals with ID/DD may breathe hard or quickly, which may happen with or without any complaint of pain.
- Other symptoms:
  - Breaking out in a cold sweat
  - Nausea
  - Light-headedness
  - Individuals with ID/DD may look blotchy or sweaty. They may look off balance without complaining of light-headedness. They may even fall down.



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2. Call 911 if signs and symptoms appear and last more than five (5) minutes:
  - Transporting the individual by car can delay treatment.
  - Once emergency personnel have taken over care, gather important information for emergency personnel and to take to the hospital (medication list, allergy list, baseline vital signs, insurance information, contact information for the key decision maker (i.e. guardian), description of the person's usual abilities and predictable behavior issues). See *Health Record Form*, available at <http://www.in.gov/fssa/ddrs/4247.htm> under Health & Safety: Managing Appointments, as a possible way of recording this information.
  - Tell the emergency personnel important information about the person such as if they are unable to take pills by mouth, communication means, special positioning needs, other health concerns, etc.
  - Assist emergency personnel as needed to assess and treat the person. Vital signs will be taken, oxygen may be started, and emergency medication may be given.
3. Accompany the individual to the hospital to support the person, provide information, and receive health education.
4. Maintain certification in CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) and start CPR as indicated.
5. Be aware of special considerations for persons with ID/DD:
  - Existing patterns of behavior may include some of the signs of heart attack. It is important for staff to act quickly and rule out whether those patterns are a sign of medical problems or not.
  - Further medical testing is often needed to determine if chest rubbing, shortness of breath, or sudden sweating are caused by the heart or other serious health problems.
  - If you are unsure if the signs and symptoms of an individual indicate a health emergency, seek immediate medical assistance to determine.
6. Consult with the person's personal physician to learn their heart attack risk. Decisions are hard to make when an emergency is already happening. Before an emergency happens, every adult with ID/DD and their caregiver should know their heart attack risk. This knowledge will help all know if there is a significant risk for heart attack and, therefore, the individual and caregivers can respond better if signs of an emergency arise.



7. Educate the person and/or staff to be able to recognize and respond to a possible heart emergency for individuals with an increased risk of heart attack.
8. Make sure a risk plan is in place for persons at risk for heart attack, including strategies to address individualized needs, tracking, monitoring, and analyzing data, notification thresholds, and staff training.

### Learning Assessment

The following questions can be used to verify a person's competency regarding the material contained in this Fact Sheet:

1. True or False: Discomfort or a heavy feeling in the chest can signal a heart attack.
2. True or False: Women do not frequently experience heart attacks.
3. True or False: Some people who are experiencing a heart attack may not recognize the symptoms and wait hours or even days before seeking needed medical care.
4. True or False: Being treated within an hour of the first symptoms can make a significant difference in treatment and recovery.
5. True or False: Calling 911 for chest pain without any other signs or symptoms would probably turn out to be a waste of the emergency medical personnel's time.
6. True or False: It may be necessary to do additional medical testing for persons with ID/DD to determine if a heart emergency is the cause of symptoms.



### References

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### Learning Assessment Answers

1. True
2. False
3. True
4. True
5. False
6. True