



When Heart Attack Strikes

ST. JOHN'S EXPERTS EXPLAIN WHY CALLING 9-1-1 TO GET RAPID CARE FOR A HEART ATTACK CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE

WHEN A HEART ATTACK STRIKES, every second counts. Acting quickly can save your life or the life of a loved one.

According to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, more than 1 million Americans suffer a heart attack each year; of those, 460,000 are fatal, and half of those deaths occur within one hour of the start of symptoms and before the person reaches the hospital.

MINUTES MATTER

"Fortunately, you can protect your heart by calling 9-1-1 as soon as you have symptoms," says Janet O'Leary, RN, emergency services/pre-hospital care coordinator at St. John's Regional Medical Center (SJRMC). "Call even if you are not sure you're having a heart attack."

All of the following can be signs of a heart attack: chest discomfort, pressure, tightness, squeezing that spreads through the chest and/or radiates to other areas of the body, shortness of breath, nausea, vomiting, belching, sweating, palpitations, lightheadedness, unusual fatigue, and fainting. In women, signs may also include pain or discomfort in the center of the chest.

"A heart attack, also known as a myocardial infarction [MI], occurs when the blood supply to an area of the heart is cut off as a result of a blockage of one or more of the coronary arteries," says David Schmidt, MD, medical director of Cardiology at St. John's. "This process occurs when cholesterol plaque that has deposited within the arteries of the heart suddenly becomes disrupted and forms a blood clot. The combination of the cholesterol plaque and the newly formed blood clot completely block the coronary

artery, resulting in a heart attack. The faster a heart attack patient is treated, the lower their risk is of heart muscle damage or death. This is why it's so important that patients not delay in seeking care."

SPECIAL CARE FOR URGENT HEART ATTACKS

By calling 9-1-1, you ensure that you receive the right treatment for the type of heart attack you are having. "If, during an MI, an artery becomes completely blocked and the damage involves the full thickness of the heart muscle, the resulting life-threatening condition is known as an ST elevation MI, or STEMI," explains Dr. Schmidt. The treatment for a STEMI is different from that for other types of heart attacks. This is why it is extremely important to be taken via ambulance to a hospital that has been designated as a STEMI receiving center, where a STEMI can be treated within 90 minutes or less, as American College of Cardiology and American Heart Association guidelines suggest.

In October 2006, the *American Heart Journal* reported that the best treatment for a STEMI is balloon angioplasty, also known as a primary percutaneous coronary intervention (PCI), performed in a timely manner by experienced professionals. "This is a minimally invasive procedure performed in the cardiac catheterization lab [cath lab] during which a very small wire is inserted into the blocked artery," says Dr. Schmidt. "A tiny balloon is then inserted over the wire and expanded inside the artery to open up the blockage and restore blood flow to the heart. Often, a device called a stent is placed at the site of the blockage to further secure the coronary artery."