



Prinzmetal's angina, variant angina or coronary artery spasms

What is Prinzmetal's angina?

People with Prinzmetal's angina – also known as **variant angina** or **coronary artery spasm** – get a pain in the chest known as angina. Angina is the pain or uncomfortable feeling that happens when the heart muscle does not get enough blood and oxygen. But unlike the typical angina associated with coronary heart disease, Prinzmetal's angina usually happens when you are resting, and not necessarily after you have been exercising or physically exerting yourself. It affects women and men equally and can also affect quite young people. About three-quarters of people who have Prinzmetal's angina also have evidence of coronary heart disease in their arteries. (We explain more about this below.)

In some people, angina associated with coronary heart disease can also occur at rest and is known as unstable angina. Unless you have tests to rule out coronary heart disease, there is no way of knowing what is causing the pain.

What causes it?

The coronary arteries are the arteries that carry blood and oxygen to the heart muscle. Angina associated with coronary heart disease is caused by the build-up of fatty deposits in the coronary arteries, which leads to narrowing in one or more of these arteries. This process is called atherosclerosis.

Prinzmetal's or variant angina occurs when a coronary artery goes into spasm. This can suddenly deprive the heart muscle of blood and oxygen. This does not always mean that you have atherosclerosis, but fatty deposits can make the condition worse.

Drugs such as ergotamine (which is used to treat migraines) have been known to bring on attacks. The use of recreational drugs, alcohol abuse, and withdrawal from alcohol can all trigger coronary spasm.

What are the symptoms?

The pain can be very severe, but usually subsides after a short time. Attacks tend to come in 'clusters' of two or three, and may occur every day at a predictable time, usually late at night or in the early hours of the morning. The pain can be accompanied by abnormal heart rhythms, which may need treatment. If you feel that your heart rate is irregular, or if you experience palpitations, you should see your doctor about it.

How is it detected and treated?

Your doctor will normally diagnose Prinzmetal's angina:

- if you get angina when you are resting, and

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This information is not intended to substitute the advice that your doctor or specialist can give you.



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- if there are changes on an ECG which suggest that you may be having a heart attack, but then the ECG returns to normal – which clearly shows you haven't had a heart attack
- if an angiogram shows that there is no significant artery hardening or disease.

Prinzmetal's angina can be satisfactorily controlled using medication that will help to relieve the spasms. The outlook for people with Prinzmetal's angina is good. It is rare for coronary artery spasm to lead to a heart attack.

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