

## Checklist



Session time:  
**40 minutes**  
(+ optional  
extra **10 minutes**)

## You will need

● Training card 3

● Visual card 3



● Summary sheet 3



● Watch your own heart attack film


## Session 3

# Symptoms of coronary heart disease and heart attack

The aim of the session is to understand:

- ✓ What the symptoms of coronary heart disease are.
- ✓ What a heart attack is.
- ✓ What the common symptoms of a heart attack are.
- ✓ The importance of calling 999 immediately if you think you are, or someone else is, having a heart attack.
- ✓ What a cardiac arrest is.

The information you need to get across is:

 10 minutes

### What are the symptoms of coronary heart disease?

The symptoms of **coronary heart disease** vary for each individual. Some people may be breathless when they try to do normal everyday things, others may have chest pain (**angina**). No two people are the same.

Angina is a type of coronary heart disease. If you suffer from angina you can help to prevent your condition becoming worse by looking at your lifestyle and making simple changes. Having angina does not necessarily mean that you will have a **heart attack**, but it does increase your risk. If you experience chest pain for the first time or your angina symptoms are different from what you are used to, then you could be having a heart attack. And, you should **call 999 immediately**.

### What is a heart attack?

A heart attack happens when a blood clot completely blocks one of the **coronary arteries** that supply the heart. As a result of this, a part of the heart muscle does not get an adequate blood supply. This can permanently damage the heart muscle. Some people also develop a life-threatening irregular heartbeat, which can lead to **sudden death**. Most heart attacks happen as the result of coronary heart disease.

### What are the common symptoms of a heart attack?

The symptoms of a heart attack can vary from one person to another. Some common symptoms include:

- chest pain or discomfort which may spread to the arms, neck, jaw, stomach or back
- a dull pain, ache or 'heavy' feeling in your chest
- chest pain or discomfort which feels like indigestion but which also makes you feel generally unwell
- feeling sick, sweaty, breathless, lightheaded, dizzy or generally unwell, as well as having chest pain or discomfort.

## Why is it important to call 999 immediately if you think you are having a heart attack?

During a heart attack, the sudden loss of blood supply to the heart muscle causes two problems:

- It damages your heart. Once the blood supply is interrupted your heart muscle will start to die. If a large part of your heart muscle dies, it can lead to **heart failure** and greatly reduce your quality of life in the future.
- It increases the risk of having a life-threatening irregular heartbeat, which may lead to a **cardiac arrest**.

## What is a cardiac arrest?

This is when someone's heart stops pumping. Unless they receive basic **life-support** (chest compressions and rescue breaths) quickly, they will die.

One in three people who have a heart attack will die before they reach hospital. That's why it's so important to call 999 immediately.


### Heartstart UK

Ideally, everyone should know what to do if someone has a heart attack or a cardiac arrest. About three in every four cardiac arrests happen away from hospital and there may be nobody around to help.

**Heartstart UK** is an initiative coordinated by the BHF to teach members of the public what to do in a life-threatening emergency – simple skills that save lives. It only takes two hours to learn the skills, which may some day save a life.


To find out more about Heartstart UK, or to find a course near you, call the BHF Heart Helpline on **0300 330 3311**.

## Pre-session preparation

Print out *Summary sheet 3* 

### Activities

#### Key activity: Symptoms of a heart attack discussion (whole group)


 10 minutes

Ask the group to recall the symptoms of a heart attack. Write their answers on a flipchart. Finish with the statements that if you, or anyone around you, experience any of these symptoms, don't ignore them. Call 999 immediately. The longer you wait for medical assistance, the lower your chance of survival.

Common symptoms include:

- chest pain or discomfort which may spread to the arms, neck, jaw, stomach or back
- a dull pain, ache or 'heavy' feeling in your chest
- chest pain or discomfort which feels like indigestion but which also makes you feel generally unwell
- feeling sick, sweaty, breathless, lightheaded, dizzy or generally unwell, as well as having chest pain or discomfort.

#### Key activity: Barriers to calling 999 discussion (small groups/pairs)

 20 minutes

People often delay calling for an ambulance when experiencing chest pain or other symptoms of a heart attack. As this delay can lead to permanent damage to the heart, or death, ask the groups or pairs to answer the following questions:

## 1. Why do you think people delay calling 999 when they are having chest pain or other symptoms of a heart attack?

There are many reasons, including:

- uncertainty about the symptoms
- not wishing to make a fuss
- refusing to believe that it could be happening to them.

Remind them that, the longer you wait to call, the greater the risk of permanent damage to the heart muscle, and the greater the risk of dying. Calling for an ambulance is vital if you think you are having a heart attack.

## 2. What might stop you calling 999 if you were experiencing chest pain or other symptoms?

Examples might be:

- Worry about a language barrier between you and the 999 operator. (You do not need to worry about this as translators are available.)
- You thought you would call your GP first. (Calling your GP will cost you precious time – always call 999 if experiencing chest pain or other symptoms of a heart attack.)
- You thought that the symptoms were caused by something else.

### After the discussion

- Ask the groups/pairs to nominate a spokesperson to share a couple of their answers with the whole group. Write their suggestions on a flipchart.
- Make a clear statement – that you should call 999 immediately if you think you are, or someone else is, having a heart attack. The emergency services would rather hear from you and discover that it is a false alarm than not hear from you at all.

### Additional activity: Short film – *Watch your own heart attack* (whole group) (optional extra 10 minutes)

If you have time, show the group the two-minute film, *Watch your own heart attack*, which shows what it is like to have a heart attack. (You can watch it at [www.2minutes.org.uk](http://www.2minutes.org.uk)).

Afterwards, discuss how the film makes them feel and whether it would help them recognise the symptoms if they, or someone else, experienced them. Emphasise that:

- this only shows some common symptoms and
- they shouldn't ignore symptoms which are more subtle, or different to those in the film.

## At the end of the session

Hand out *Summary sheet 3* 

## Background information

Although you now have all the basic information you need to deliver Session 3, here's some more detail you might find useful.

### Symptoms of a heart attack

- It's important to remember that the symptoms of a heart attack can vary from one person to another. They can be mild, severe, or somewhere in between. No two heart attacks are the same. Symptoms can range from a severe pain in the centre of the chest, to having mild chest discomfort that makes you feel generally unwell. In many cases, chest pain or tightness are accompanied by a range of other symptoms. Some people may not experience chest pain at all but feel pain in other areas such as their jaw, back or shoulder.

### Treatments for heart attack

The most common treatments for people with acute coronary syndrome (heart attack or unstable angina) are **thrombolysis** or a **coronary angioplasty** with **stents**.

- **Thrombolysis** helps to dissolve the clot that is blocking the artery, and helps to restore the blood supply to the heart muscle. Ideally the injection should be given as soon as possible. That's why, if you think you may be having a heart attack, it is important to call 999 immediately, so that the blood supply to your heart muscle can be restored as quickly as possible.
- **Coronary angioplasty with stent** is a treatment to widen the narrowed artery. When angioplasty is done as an emergency, it is called primary angioplasty.

### Women and heart disease

- Coronary heart disease (CHD) kills three times more women than breast cancer and there are over one million women in the UK living with CHD.
- Women are less aware than men about their risk of CHD and often ignore, or do not know, the symptoms of a heart attack. They are also slower to call 999 for help, dramatically reducing their chances of survival.
- They are less likely to seek help from their GP so are often more unwell and difficult to treat.
- Some women may think of coronary heart disease as a male problem, as women tend to get heart disease later in life than men.
- Women may be protected by female hormones until the menopause. It's true that fewer women than men get coronary heart disease before the age of 50, but by the time women reach their 60s the gap between men and women narrows.
- Women are also less likely to attend cardiac rehab programmes, making recovery difficult and increasing the risk of future events.
- Women should be encouraged to:
  - recognise the risk factors for coronary heart disease and the signs and symptoms
  - have a cardiovascular risk assessment, particularly after the menopause, and
  - be aware of their blood pressure.

## For more information

**bhf.org.uk**

**BHF Heart Helpline: 0300 330 3311** – for information and support on anything related to heart health. This service is available in English only.

**BHF booklets:**

**Heart attack** (in English)

**Coronary angioplasty** (in English)

**Women and heart disease** (in English)

To order these free resources, call the **BHF Orderline** on **0870 600 6566**.