Am I Having a Heart Attack?

A heart attack (also called a myocardial infarction) is what happens when part of the heart muscle is damaged or dies because it is not receiving enough oxygen. Usually the blockage is caused by atherosclerosis (a build-up of fatty deposits, called plaque, inside the artery).

More than 40 million Americans will suffer from some form of heart disease. Imagine 20 NFL stadiums, with every seat full. That could be the number of people that will have a heart attack this year alone. Each year, about 1.2 million American have a heart attack. Over 40% of those heart attacks are fatal, and more than half of those deaths occur in the emergency room or before reaching the hospital. The American Heart Association says that nearly 100% of people can survive a heart attack if they get to the hospital in one hour. But, the sad fact is, only 20% ever go to the hospital at all.

Usually, symptoms of a heart attack come on slowly, with mild pain and discomfort. People are unsure of what is happening, so they wait. Sometimes they wait too long. That is why it is extremely important to know the WARNING SIGNS of a heart attack. Everyone could have different symptoms, but there are some general signs. A word of caution; if you have had a heart attack previously, the symptoms could be totally different this time. Do not go on your past experiences. Lastly, men and women may experience symptoms differently.

Warning Signs:

- Chest Discomfort (usually in the center of the chest) lasting more than a few minutes. It may go away, and then come back. It could feel like uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness, and pain. Some experience a “crushing pain” like an elephant standing on your chest. The “crushing pain” is a symptom felt by men more than women. Usually a woman’s symptoms are more subtle.
- Discomfort in upper body (arms, neck, jaw) or in the back or stomach
- Shortness of breath – this can accompany chest pain, or happen first
- Breaking out in a cold “dripping” sweat
- Nausea/vomiting
- Dizziness/lightheadedness
- Pain that radiates down arm, or into jaw or back of neck
- Ongoing fatigue
- Blurred vision

If you experience ANY of these signs, call 911! During a heart attack, minutes matter. A heart attack is a scary frightening event, but by learning the steps to take, you can save a life –maybe your own!
Women and men are both at risk for heart disease. We cannot change our age or our family history, but we can change our lifestyle. By making a few key lifestyle improvements we can prevent heart attacks:

- Stop smoking
- Eat a healthy low-fat diet
- Get regular exercise (at least 3 times a week)
- Keep weight under control, lose extra weight if you need to
- Attend Blood Pressure and Cholesterol screenings and lower if necessary
- Manage stress in your life
- See your doctor regularly
- Control your blood sugar
- Ask your physician about aspirin therapy

This article was brought to you by Central Michigan District Health Department which serves the residents of Arenac, Clare, Gladwin, Isabella, Osceola, and Roscommon Counties.