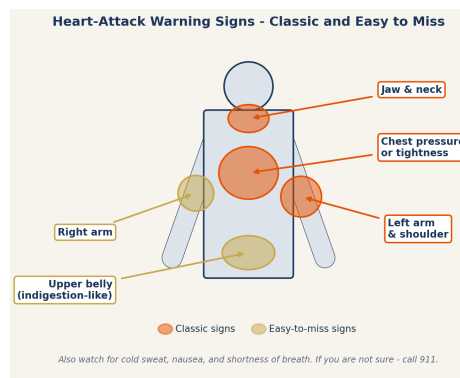


Understanding Cardiac Warning Signs

When to call 911, when to call the office, and what can wait

When in doubt, call 911. We would rather see you and send you home.



Online: <https://go.riasalimd.com/cardiac-warning-signs-guide>

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Names & Terms You Will Hear

Term	Meaning
Heart attack (myocardial infarction, MI)	Heart muscle is damaged because a blocked artery cuts off its blood supply. It is an emergency - call 911.
Angina	Chest discomfort that happens when the heart is not getting enough blood. It often feels like pressure or tightness, not sharp pain.
Atypical symptoms	Heart symptoms that do not fit the 'classic' picture - such as shortness of breath, jaw or back discomfort, nausea, or an indigestion-like feeling.
Cardiac arrest	The heart suddenly stops pumping. The person collapses and is not breathing normally. Call 911, start CPR, and use an AED.
Stroke	A sudden loss of blood flow to part of the brain. Use the F.A.S.T. test to spot it, and call 911 right away.
F.A.S.T.	A simple stroke check: Face drooping, Arm weakness, Speech trouble, Time to call 911.
Arrhythmia (heart-rhythm problem)	A heartbeat that is too fast, too slow, or irregular. With fainting or chest symptoms, it can be dangerous.
Syncope (fainting)	Passing out, usually from a brief drop in blood flow to the brain. Fainting with chest pain or a racing heart needs urgent care.
Heart failure	The heart cannot keep up with the body's needs, so fluid backs up. Sudden worsening - more swelling, weight gain, or breathlessness - needs prompt care.
AED (automated external defibrillator)	A device that checks the heart's rhythm and, if needed, gives a shock to restart it. It will not shock a normal heart.
Hands-Only CPR	Chest compressions without rescue breaths. Push hard and fast in the center of the chest to keep blood moving.
EMS (Emergency Medical Services)	The 911 ambulance team. They can start treatment on the way and act fast if the heart stops.



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If someone collapses and is not breathing normally - act now.

- 1. Call 911** (or have someone call) and put the phone on speaker.
- 2. Start Hands-Only CPR:** push hard and fast in the center of the chest, about 100 to 120 pushes a minute. The beat of “Stayin’ Alive” by the Bee Gees is the right speed. Do not stop until help takes over.
- 3. Use an AED** as soon as one arrives: turn it on and follow the spoken steps. An AED will **only** shock a dangerous rhythm - it **cannot** shock a normal heart, so you cannot hurt someone by trying. Find the nearest public AED fast with the free **PulsePoint** app.

Call 911 now for chest pressure or tightness that lasts more than a few minutes, for any sudden stroke sign (face drooping, arm weakness, trouble speaking - **F.A.S.T.**), for a collapse, or for fainting with chest or breathing symptoms. **Do not drive yourself.** The 911 team can begin treatment on the way and act fast if the heart stops.



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What Is Cardiac Warning Signs?

- Your heart can warn you before something serious happens. The hard part is knowing which warnings mean act now.
- This guide sorts symptoms into three lanes: call 911 now, call the office today, or watch and check in.
- The most dangerous mistake is waiting to see if a symptom passes. In a heart attack or stroke, minutes matter.
- Heart trouble does not always look like the movies. Many people feel pressure, breathlessness, or nausea - not sharp pain.
- Some serious signs have nothing to do with chest pain at all - like a collapse, a fainting spell, or a sudden stroke.
- You cannot safely judge a dangerous heart symptom at home. When in doubt, call. We would rather see you and send you home.



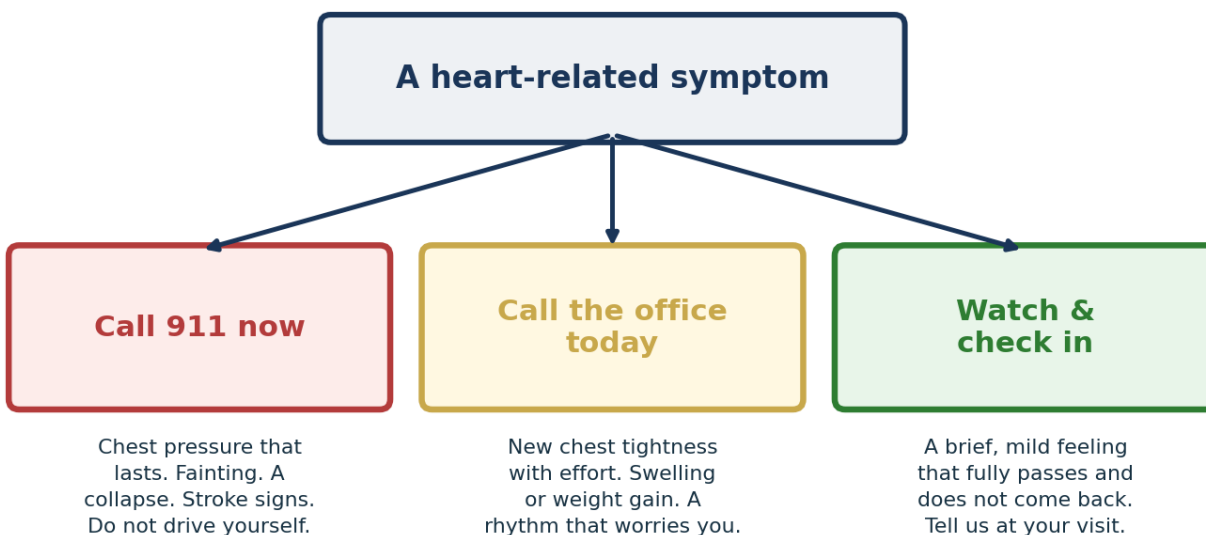
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When a Heart Symptom Strikes: 911, Office, or Watch



When in doubt, call 911. We would rather see you and send you home.

The whole guide in one picture: a heart symptom sorts into call 911 now, call the office today, or watch and check in. When in doubt, call 911.

Heart Attack - Classic Signs and the Easy-to-Miss Ones

- Classic: chest pressure, tightness, squeezing, or pain - often spreading to an arm, the shoulder, the jaw, the neck, or the back.
- Classic: a cold sweat, nausea, or shortness of breath along with the chest discomfort.
- Easy to miss: shortness of breath, unusual tiredness, or an indigestion-like feeling with little or no chest pain.
- Easy to miss: discomfort in the jaw, neck, upper back, or just one arm - without the 'classic' chest squeeze.
- Women, older adults, and people with diabetes more often have these quieter signs - and their heart risk is more often missed.
- For symptom details, see our [Chest Pain guide](#) and our [Heart Disease in Women guide](#).



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Remember: heart trouble can be quiet. It can show up as shortness of breath; discomfort in the jaw, neck, arm, or upper back; nausea; a cold sweat; an indigestion-like feeling; or sudden, unusual tiredness - with little or no chest pain. These easy-to-miss signs are more common in women, older adults, and people with diabetes. When in doubt, get checked.



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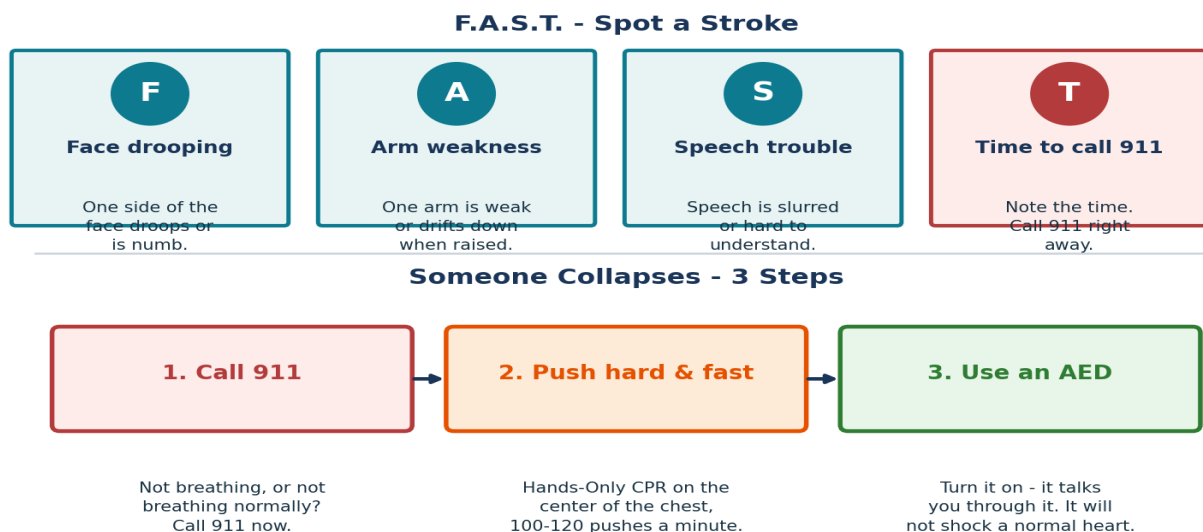
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Why It Matters

- In a heart attack, heart muscle is dying minute by minute. Fast treatment saves muscle and saves lives.
- Calling 911 is faster and safer than driving. The ambulance team can begin treatment up to an hour sooner than getting there by car.
- People who arrive by ambulance may also be treated faster once they reach the hospital.
- In cardiac arrest, the heart stops. Without quick CPR and an AED, survival drops fast - so bystanders, not just doctors, save lives.
- In a stroke, the brain loses blood flow. The sooner the 911 team and hospital act, the more brain can be saved.
- Most symptoms turn out to be minor. But because the dangerous ones can look mild, the safe move is to get checked.



Two time-critical emergencies on one page: the F.A.S.T. stroke test, and the three steps if someone collapses - call 911, push hard and fast, and use an AED.



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Stroke (F.A.S.T.) and Cardiac Arrest - Act in Seconds

- Stroke - use F.A.S.T.: Face drooping, Arm weakness, Speech trouble, Time to call 911. Note the time you first saw the symptom.
- Other stroke signs: sudden numbness on one side, sudden confusion, trouble seeing, severe headache, or loss of balance (the 'B.E.' in B.E. F.A.S.T.).
- Cardiac arrest - the person collapses and is not breathing, or is only gasping. Call 911, start Hands-Only CPR, and use an AED.
- Push hard and fast in the center of the chest, about 100 to 120 pushes a minute - the beat of 'Stayin' Alive.' Do not stop.
- An AED checks the rhythm and gives spoken steps. It will not shock a normal heart, so you cannot hurt someone by trying.
- To learn more, see our [Sudden Cardiac Arrest guide](#) and our [Home AED guide](#).



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Risk Factors

Some patients are more likely to develop this condition. Knowing your risk helps your care team take extra precautions.

Risk Factor	Why It Increases Risk
Known heart disease, or a past heart attack or stent	A heart that has had artery trouble before is more likely to have it again - take new symptoms seriously.
Diabetes	Diabetes can dull the warning pain, so a heart attack may feel mild or be 'silent.' Watch for breathlessness and fatigue.
Older age	In older adults, symptoms are more often vague - tiredness, confusion, or breathlessness rather than chest pain.
Being a woman	Women more often have symptoms other than chest pain, and their heart risk is more often missed or brushed off.
High blood pressure, high cholesterol, or smoking	Each one damages arteries over time and raises the chance of a heart attack or stroke.
Heart failure or a known rhythm problem	These conditions can flare. Knowing your personal red flags helps you act before it becomes an emergency.



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Symptom Triage: Call 911, Call the Office, or Watch - and Why

Symptom	What to do	Why
Chest pressure or tightness lasting more than a few minutes	Call 911 now	This can be a heart attack. Fast care saves heart muscle.
A collapse with no normal breathing	Call 911, start CPR, use an AED	This is cardiac arrest. Bystander action keeps blood moving until help arrives.
Sudden face droop, arm weakness, or slurred speech	Call 911 now (F.A.S.T.)	These are stroke signs. The brain loses cells every minute.
Fainting, or a very fast or very slow pulse with symptoms	Call 911 now	A dangerous rhythm can be the cause and needs urgent care.
New chest tightness with effort that eases with rest	Call the office today	This can be new angina and should be checked soon, not ignored.
Worse swelling, fast weight gain, or breathless lying flat	Call the office today (911 if severe)	Your heart failure may be worsening. Early changes can prevent a hospital stay.
A brief, mild feeling that fully passes and does not return	Watch and tell us at your visit	Likely minor - but we still want to know so we can judge it.

The Three Lanes at a Glance

Call 911 now	Call the office today	Watch & check in
• Chest pressure that lasts • A collapse or fainting • Stroke signs (F.A.S.T.) • Do not drive yourself	• New chest tightness with effort • Worse swelling or weight gain • A rhythm that worries you • We can see you quickly	• A brief, mild feeling • It fully passes • It does not come back • Tell us at your visit



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Treatment Options

- The 'treatment' for a warning sign is the right action at the right speed - 911, the office, or watchful waiting.
- For a heart attack, the care team works to open the blocked artery quickly. For a stroke, they work to restore brain blood flow.
- For cardiac arrest, treatment starts with bystanders: call 911, push hard and fast on the chest, and use an AED.
- For a dangerous rhythm or fainting, the team checks the heartbeat and may use medicines, a procedure, or a device.
- For worsening heart failure, treatment often adjusts your fluid pills and your plan - sometimes in the hospital.
- While you wait for 911: unlock the door, sit or lie down, note the time symptoms started, and chew aspirin only if told to.



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911 vs. the Office vs. Watch - and What to Do While You Wait

- Call 911 now for: lasting chest pressure, a collapse, stroke signs, fainting, or sudden severe breathlessness.
- Call the office today for: new chest tightness with effort, worsening swelling or weight gain, or a rhythm change that worries you.
- Watch and check in for: a brief, mild feeling that fully passes and does not return - then tell us at your visit.
- While you wait for 911: unlock the door, sit or lie down, and note the time symptoms started.
- Chew an aspirin only if 911 or your clinician tells you to - and never let it delay the 911 call.
- If you are ever unsure which lane you are in, choose 911. We would rather see you and send you home.
- For what happens at the hospital, see our [Heart Attack \(ACS\) guide](#).

While you wait for the ambulance: unlock the front door so the crew can get in; sit or lie down and stay calm; note the time your symptoms started; gather your medicine list; and chew an aspirin **only** if 911 or your clinician tells you to. Do not eat or drink anything else.



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Comfort Measures at Home (No Medication Needed)

These simple steps support healing and ease symptoms. Use them alongside any medication your doctor prescribes.

- Keep a short list of your conditions, medicines, and allergies where help can find it - on the fridge or in your phone.
- Program 'In Case of Emergency' (ICE) contacts into your phone, and learn where your nearest hospital is.
- If you live alone, tell a neighbor or family member which symptoms would make you call 911.
- Learn Hands-Only CPR and how to use an AED - a 5-minute video is enough to start. You could save someone you love.
- Download the free PulsePoint app so you can find the nearest public AED quickly.
- Keep your phone charged and within reach, especially at night.



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Risks, Benefits, and Alternatives

Every choice has trade-offs. Use this table to start the shared decision conversation.

Option	Risks	Benefits	Alternatives
Calling 911 for a possible heart attack or stroke	You may be checked and sent home if it is not serious. An ambulance trip has a cost.	If it is real, fast care saves heart muscle and brain - and treatment can start on the way.	Driving yourself or waiting - both are unsafe when the cause could be dangerous.
Starting Hands-Only CPR on a collapsed person	You may feel unsure, and ribs can crack during good CPR. Good Samaritan laws protect bystanders.	CPR keeps blood moving to the brain. Bystander CPR can double or triple the chance of survival.	Doing nothing while waiting for EMS - the worst outcome, since survival falls every minute.
Calling the office today for a new, non-emergency symptom	You may need a visit or a test, which takes time. Most turn out to be minor.	Catches a developing problem early, before it becomes an emergency.	Waiting until your next routine visit, which may be too long for a new symptom.
Watching a brief, mild feeling that fully passes	A symptom you dismiss could be an early warning - tell us so we can judge it.	Avoids an unneeded ER trip for a clearly minor, one-time feeling.	Calling 911 for every small twinge, which is rarely needed but never wrong if you are scared.



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Common Misconceptions

Myth	Reality
A heart attack always means crushing chest pain and collapsing.	Many heart attacks are mild or slow, or cause no chest pain at all. Some people just feel short of breath, tired, or sick to the stomach.
Women and men have the same heart-attack symptoms.	Women more often have nausea, shortness of breath, unusual tiredness, or back and jaw discomfort - and their heart risk is more often missed.
It is faster to have someone drive me to the ER.	Call 911. The ambulance can start treatment right away, can restart the heart if it stops, and often gets you treated faster at the hospital.
I should wait a while to see if it passes.	Waiting is the most dangerous choice. In a heart attack or stroke, minutes of delay mean more permanent damage.
A heart attack and cardiac arrest are the same thing.	A heart attack is a blocked artery. Cardiac arrest is the heart suddenly stopping. A heart attack can lead to one - both need 911.
I should always take an aspirin if I think it is my heart.	Chew an aspirin only if 911 or your clinician tells you to. It is not safe for everyone, and it must not delay calling 911.
If the AED might hurt someone, I should not use it.	An AED checks the rhythm first and will not shock a normal heart. It gives spoken steps, and anyone can use one.



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Possible Complications

Knowing what can go wrong helps you spot problems early. Most complications are uncommon, especially with treatment.

Where / What	What Can Happen
Heart muscle damage and heart failure	When a heart attack is not treated fast, more muscle is lost. The heart can become permanently weaker, which leads to heart failure.
Cardiac arrest	A heart attack or a dangerous rhythm can make the heart suddenly stop. This is the main cause of death before reaching a hospital - which is why bystander CPR and an AED matter.
Lasting brain injury from a stroke	The longer a stroke goes untreated, the more brain cells are lost. Fast 911 care gives the best chance to limit damage.
Injury from a fall during fainting	Passing out can cause a head injury or broken bone. Fainting with heart symptoms also points to a cause that needs treatment.
Worse outcomes from delay	For every serious cause, waiting makes the damage larger and the recovery harder. Early care leads to better results.



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Points to Know

If you remember nothing else, remember these key points.

- When in doubt, call 911. We would rather see you and send you home.
- Chest pressure, a collapse, stroke signs (F.A.S.T.), or fainting with heart symptoms - call 911 now. Do not drive yourself.
- Heart symptoms are often not 'chest pain' - breathlessness, jaw or back discomfort, nausea, a cold sweat, or sudden tiredness all count.
- Women, older adults, and people with diabetes more often have these easy-to-miss symptoms.
- If someone collapses and is not breathing normally: call 911, push hard and fast on the chest, and use an AED.
- While you wait for 911: unlock the door, note the time symptoms started, sit down, and chew aspirin only if told.
- Sudden weight gain, more swelling, or being more breathless lying flat means your heart failure is worsening - call us, or 911 if severe.



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When to Call Us - and When to Call 911

If you are not sure, call. We would rather hear from you twice than miss a real problem.

- Chest pressure, tightness, or pain that lasts more than a few minutes, or that goes away and comes back - call 911.
- Chest discomfort with shortness of breath, sweating, nausea, or pain spreading to the arm, jaw, neck, or back - call 911.
- Any sudden stroke sign - face drooping, arm weakness, or trouble speaking (F.A.S.T.) - call 911 and note the time.
- A collapse with no normal breathing - call 911, start Hands-Only CPR, and use an AED.
- Fainting or near-fainting, or a very fast or very slow pulse with chest pain, breathlessness, or dizziness - call 911.
- Severe, sudden breathlessness, or being unable to breathe lying flat - call 911.
- Worsening swelling, rapid weight gain over a day or two, or steadily worse breathlessness - call our office the same day.
- A brief, mild feeling that fully passes and does not return - mention it to us at your next visit.

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Trusted Resources

The links below are the trusted resources Dr. Ali used to write this guide and that he recommends you visit for more information. Each is a clickable link in the digital version and a Short.io tracked URL on the printed version.

- [American Heart Association - Warning Signs of a Heart Attack](#) - Plain-language list of heart-attack warning signs, including the easy-to-miss ones.
- [American Stroke Association - Stroke Symptoms \(F.A.S.T.\)](#) - The F.A.S.T. stroke test and why every minute counts.
- [AHA Hands-Only CPR Training](#) - Free 5-minute online Hands-Only CPR training from the American Heart Association.
- [American Red Cross - First Aid, CPR & AED Classes](#) - Find an in-person or online CPR and AED class near you.
- [PulsePoint Respond App](#) - Free app that alerts nearby bystanders to a cardiac arrest and shows the nearest public AED.
- [Cleveland Clinic - Heart Attack](#) - Patient-friendly overview of heart-attack symptoms and when to seek care.



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Sources Used to Build This Guide

Every recommendation in this guide is grounded in one or more of the studies, guidelines, or trusted resources below. Short links are tracked so Dr. Ali can see which references patients are reading; nothing personally identifying is captured.

- [AHA — Warning Signs of a Heart Attack](#) [Patient-Education]
Primary patient-facing list of heart-attack warning signs, including atypical and women's presentations, and the call-911 imperative
- [AHA — Heart Attack Symptoms in Women](#) [Patient-Education]
Women's atypical heart-attack symptoms — jaw, neck, or back pain, nausea, shortness of breath, extreme fatigue, and an indigestion-like feeling
- [AHA — When to Call 911 vs. Drive to the ER](#) [Patient-Education]
Evidence that EMS can begin treatment up to an hour sooner and that ambulance arrival speeds in-hospital care — the do-not-drive-yourself rule
- [American Stroke Association — Stroke Symptoms \(F.A.S.T.\)](#) [Patient-Education]
F.A.S.T. stroke recognition (Face, Arm, Speech, Time) and the time-critical call-911 message; B.E. balance and eyes extension
- [AHA — Hands-Only CPR](#) [Patient-Education]
Hands-Only CPR technique — 100-120 compressions per minute, push hard and fast, 'Stayin' Alive' beat — and free 5-minute training
- [AHA — Out-of-Hospital Chain of Survival](#) [Patient-Education]
The Chain of Survival (recognize and call 911, CPR, AED, advanced care); bystander CPR can double or triple survival
- [PulsePoint Respond App](#) [Tool]
Free app that alerts trained bystanders to nearby cardiac arrests and shows the nearest public AED
- [Cleveland Clinic — Heart Attack \(Myocardial Infarction\)](#) [Patient-Education]
Plain-language symptom triage — chest pain, breathlessness, fainting, the do-not-drive-yourself rule, and chew-aspirin-only-if-told guidance
- [AHA — Heart Attack vs. Sudden Cardiac Arrest](#) [Patient-Education]
Clarifies the difference between a heart attack (a blocked artery) and cardiac arrest (collapse with no normal breathing) so patients act correctly
- [AHA — Warning Signs of Worsening Heart Failure](#) [Patient-Education]
Worsening heart-failure red flags — rapid weight gain, increasing swelling, and breathlessness lying flat — that prompt urgent or 911 calls
- [CDC — Stroke Signs and Symptoms](#) [Patient-Education]
US government plain-language stroke symptom list reinforcing F.A.S.T. recognition and an immediate 911 call



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About This Guide

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Version: 2026-08-15

Reviewer note: Reviewed against the AHA heart-attack warning-signs page, the American Stroke Association F.A.S.T. materials, and the Cleveland Clinic heart-attack page. Ours adds: a single 911-vs-office-vs-watch decision framework, a symptom-by-symptom triage table, the classic AND easy-to-miss heart-attack signs in women, older adults, and people with diabetes, and the four things to do while you wait for help.

Disclaimer

This guide is for educational purposes only and does not replace medical advice from your physician. Recommendations may not apply to every patient. Always follow the specific instructions of Dr. Ali and your care team. In an emergency call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department.



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