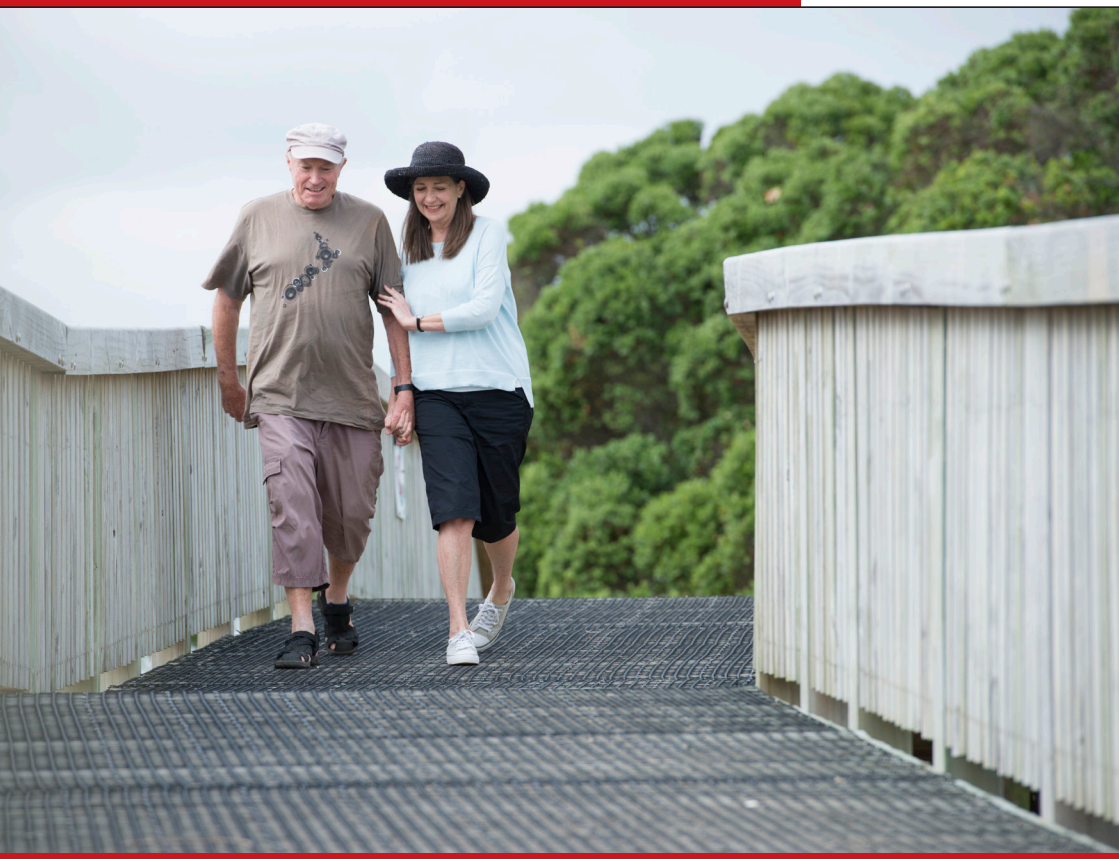
Living well after a heart attack

Heart Foundation™



My recovery checklist

After reading through this booklet, you should be able to check off the following statements.

- ☐ I know what happens during a heart attack.
- ☐ I know what to expect during my recovery.
- ☐ I know what I can do to help prevent another heart attack.
- ☐ I can recognise common signs and symptoms of a heart attack.
- ☐ I have checked out the Heart Foundation's Heart Help website **heartfoundation.org.nz/hearthelp.**
- ☐ I have emailed hearthelp@heartfoundation.org.nz to sign up to the Heart Foundation's Heart Help e-newsletter.

Acknowledgements

The Heart Foundation wishes to extend a huge thank you to Stephen, Chess, Susan, John, Keith, Graham and Julie for generously sharing their heart attack experiences.

We also wish to acknowledge everyone in the clinical community who provided input into this booklet.

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About your heart

You are not alone

You are one of 900 people in New Zealand who will leave hospital this month after having a heart attack. This means you are now at higher risk of further heart problems, but there are choices you can make to improve your life-long heart health. There are people to help you make and maintain these changes and offer ongoing support, including your family/whānau, health professionals and the Heart Foundation.

Stephen says his heart attack was a wake-up call for him to decide what is important in life and to make some changes.

"A heart attack puts your family and friends through anguish. My wife was my rock during this experience and instrumental in keeping me together."

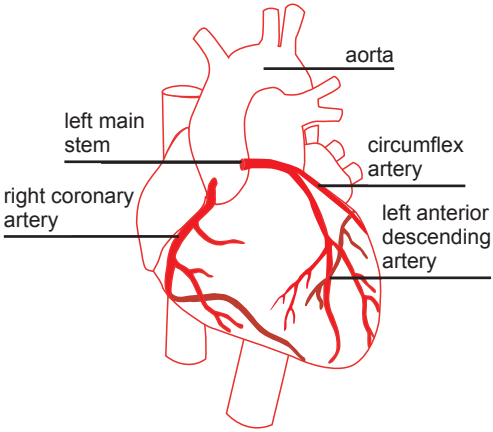
Chess found it difficult to come to terms with her heart attack.

"I spent a lot of time angry because I was a smoker. All I wanted to do was smoke, but I will never smoke again.

"It came down to altering my perspective. I have a new reality to deal with. And I think it's important to face that, not with fear, but with optimism."

To read the full stories, or to find other stories, visit **heartfoundation.org.nz/journeys**

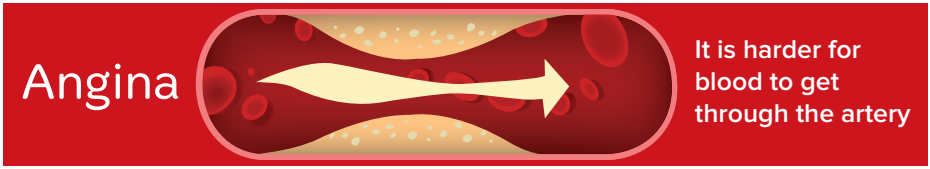
What is a heart attack?



Your heart is a powerful muscular organ that pumps blood around your body. The coronary arteries feed oxygen and energy-rich blood to your heart so it can keep pumping.

A heart attack happens when your heart can't get enough blood.

Commonly, this is because of a blockage in a coronary artery. A blockage often starts with deposits of fats and other substances building up in the inner lining of an artery. This build-up is called plaque. If one of these plaques cracks, a blood clot will form which can block the artery. This can cause a heart attack.



I had a heart attack, now what?

Heart tests and treatments

In the early stages after a heart attack, you are likely to need heart tests. These may include:

- **electrocardiograph**, ECG (looking at the electrical activity of your heart)
- **blood tests**
- **angiogram** (using dye to get special x-ray pictures of your arteries)
- **echocardiogram** (using soundwaves to look at the structure, function and size of your heart).

The ambulance paramedics hooked up **Raewyn** to an ECG and confirmed she'd had a heart attack. She was admitted to hospital.

"I couldn't believe it because it really didn't feel like a heart attack."

"I had a stent put in as there was a blockage in the arteries around my heart. I could only have one because my main artery was too narrow and damaged."

You may also need heart treatment, such as:

a stent (a tube placed inside a narrowed artery to prop it open)

coronary artery bypass graft surgery, CABG (making a new way for blood to flow around a blocked artery).

Ongoing treatment may include:

- medication
- cardiac rehabilitation
- lifestyle changes
- support.

Make sure you check in with your doctor soon after you get home from hospital. They can issue repeat prescriptions and update their records to follow up with you throughout your recovery.

For more information about procedures like coronary artery bypass graft surgery or angioplasty, download a copy of the booklets from our website **heartfoundation.org.nz**

Getting to grips with your medication

You will start taking several medications before leaving hospital, and will need to keep taking them when you go home. Heart pills are usually taken for the rest of your life to prevent further heart attacks or strokes.

Medications after a heart attack are used to:

1. lower your risk of having another heart attack by:
    - preventing arteries re-blocking
    - lowering your cholesterol
    - lowering your blood pressure.
2. control symptoms
3. improve heart function.

Key points about your medication

- Keep taking your medications regularly and make sure you don't run out - ask your GP for repeat prescriptions.
- Don't stop taking your medication without consulting your doctor or nurse. Stopping some medications suddenly can make your condition worse. If you have concerns about what your medications might be doing to you, talk to your doctor, nurse or pharmacist. Sometimes these unwanted side effects go away within a few weeks or there may be another medication available that suits you better.
- Keep a list of your medications with you. You'll need this at hand when you go to see your doctor, pharmacist, dentist or to the hospital.

Medication	Why take it?	How does it work?
Aspirin	Lowers your risk of having another heart attack.	Lowers the chance of another blood clot blocking an artery.
Ticagrelor, Clopidogrel	Lowers your risk of having another heart attack.	Lowers the chance of another blood clot blocking an artery, especially in a new stent.
Statin e.g. atorvastatin simvastatin	Lowers your risk of having another heart attack.	Lowers cholesterol. Stabilises plaque (build-up) in your arteries. Slows development of new heart disease in your arteries.
ACE inhibitor e.g. cilazapril enalapril accupril	Lowers your risk of having another heart attack. Improves heart function.	Lowers blood pressure. Makes it easier for your heart to pump blood.
Beta blocker e.g. metoprolol bisoprolol	Lowers your risk of having another heart attack. Improves heart function.	Lowers blood pressure. Lowers heart rate.
Glyceryl Trinitrate (GTN spray)	Controls symptoms of angina.	Relaxes your blood vessels so blood can flow more easily to your heart.

To learn more about your medication visit **heartfoundation.org.nz**

Talk to your doctor or nurse about cardiac rehabilitation

Cardiac rehabilitation is about support from your medical team and community throughout your recovery.

Cardiac rehabilitation begins while you are still in hospital (phase one) and can involve education, exercise, emotional support and information on medications and medical treatments.

Continuing with cardiac rehabilitation at home (phase two) will help you understand what has happened to you and aid your recovery. It will help you adjust to life after hospital, learn more about what you can expect in the near future, and give you the chance to ask any questions you may have.

Your cardiac rehabilitation classes are a good chance to ask about examples of the sorts of physical activity that are right for you as you progress through your recovery.

Evidence suggests that doing cardiac rehabilitation can help you get fitter, return to work and other activities sooner, lowering your chance of having chest pain and anxiety. It can also lower your chance of having another heart attack or needing to go back into hospital.

In the longer term, you may like to join a community-based heart support group for ongoing informal cardiac rehabilitation (phase three).

Ask your doctor or nurse for information about cardiac rehabilitation. You can also find contact details at **heartfoundation.org.nz/cardiac-rehab** or by calling the Heart Line on 0800 863 375.

Getting active and starting exercise again

The first few days and even weeks at home after a heart attack can be difficult. It can take up to six to eight weeks for your heart to heal. You may wonder what is safe to do, whether you should be going out and about, when you can expect to get back to work and when you can start exercising.

There are no hard and fast rules to answer these questions – it depends on how bad your heart attack was, and what life was like for you before your heart attack.

Exercise is an important part of your recovery. It should feel light, and you should take regular breaks. Don't feel like you are cheating by doing several short walks; this is just as effective as doing it all at once. Gradually build up to your daily activities, taking care not to over-do it, until you are fully active again.

In the long-term, you should aim for a minimum of 30 minutes of exercise a day, at a pace where you can talk comfortably.

Talk with your nurse, physio or doctor about the types of exercise you like to do and work out an exercise plan that is right for you.

"The biggest thing for me, having had a heart attack and three stents, was a loss of confidence. Can I still mow the lawn, should I lift this bucket of water? And as I've been a fanatical swimmer all my life, can I go back to swimming, specifically swimming in the sea?"

John

Angina after a heart attack

Angina is a common symptom of coronary artery disease. It is usually caused by a narrowed (but not blocked) coronary artery, which feeds blood to the heart. After a heart attack, some people experience angina, or their angina gets worse.

Angina does not cause permanent damage to the heart.

Sometimes people struggle to tell the difference between angina and a heart attack, as the symptoms can be the same. With angina, the symptoms will ease after a few minutes of resting or taking medication prescribed by your doctor such as GTN (glyceryl trinitrate). If you are having a heart attack, your symptoms are unlikely to ease after a few minutes of resting or taking medication.

Angina action plan

If you have angina symptoms

Stop and rest.

Take **1 spray of your GTN** under your tongue.

Tell someone how you feel.

Wait 5 minutes.

If you still have symptoms, take **1 more spray of your GTN** under your tongue.

Wait 5 more minutes.

If you still have symptoms, **call 111.**

It could be a heart attack.

See a doctor within 24 hours if your angina is happening more often, lasts longer or happens at rest.

If you usually have angina, and you notice any of the following changes, talk to your doctor straight away:

- you get angina when you are doing very little, or resting
- the angina is worse and lasts longer
- you get angina more often

Sex after a heart attack

Many people worry that sex will put too much stress on their heart and cause damage or another heart attack. However, most people can safely return to sexual activity after they have been diagnosed with heart disease or are recovering from a heart attack.

Sex is no different from any other kind of exercise; it is good for your heart. The amount of energy needed for sexual intercourse is about the same as walking up two normal flights of stairs briskly, so it will not unduly affect your heart. Find a position that is comfortable and does not place any stress on your chest or restrict your breathing, and avoid positions where your arms are supporting your body weight.

If after having a heart attack, you have new problems with sexual activity, this may be due to treatment.

Tablets for erectile dysfunction should not be used with GTN spray or nitrate tablets. Taken within 24 hours of each other, this combination of medications can cause a large drop in blood pressure resulting in dizziness, fainting or even a heart attack.

Talk to your doctor or nurse if you have concerns about your sexual activity

Getting behind the wheel

It will be **at least two weeks** before you can drive again after a heart attack. Different rules may apply depending on the treatment you have had, if you hold a vocational licence and if you drive passenger vehicles, trucks, forklifts, courier vans or fly aeroplanes.

You may need to have an assessment by a specialist before returning to driving. It also pays to check with your insurance company to ensure that you are fully covered.

Returning to work

Almost everyone can go back to work after a heart attack – usually within three to four weeks after leaving hospital. How soon you can return to work depends on the nature of your job and your personal rate of recovery. Talk to your doctor about the timing that will work best for you.

It is worth taking some time to think about how your heart condition will affect you in the workplace. Will you be able to do exactly the same sort of work you used to do? Will you need to work fewer hours?

It is normal to feel tired when you get back to work after your heart attack. One way to reduce fatigue is to include the type of activity you do at work into your home physical activity programme. You may also wish to speak with your employer about options like a gradual return-to-work programme.

"I thought that since my heart attack, I might be a liability working in the warehouse, but they were happy with my recovery times. When I did go back, they put me on two full weeks of light duties."

Keith

Stress, worry and feeling down

You may experience lots of different feelings, including anxiety, depression, uncertainty, fear and anger. These feelings are common, especially when you first arrive home from hospital.

One of the best ways to manage your feelings and prevent the build-up of stress, is to regain balance in your life.

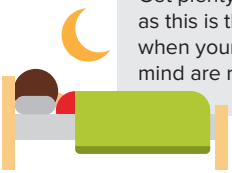
Each day, make sure you:

Do some form of physical activity

Have some rest and relaxation time

Include some enjoyable activities, especially those that make you laugh

Do some form of work where you feel useful, productive and gain a sense of achievement



Get plenty of sleep as this is the time when your body and mind are restored

It also helps to talk with others – your family, whānau or people who have gone through a similar experience. Sharing the experience helps to remind you that you are not alone.

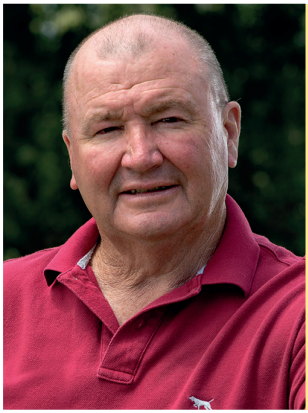
Try joining a local cardiac rehabilitation or heart support group. This will offer you ongoing support from health professionals and other people living with heart disease. For a list of groups in your local community, please ask your nurse or contact the Heart Foundation

Regaining confidence

It is likely to take some time for you to regain your former confidence. A good way to get started is to use goal setting.

For example, if you are anxious about going out for a walk on your own, start with a small goal like walking to the edge of your garden, or to the letterbox. Once you have done that a few times, set a larger goal like walking to the end of the street.

Gradually increasing your goal can help you to build up your confidence again.



Graham says he's always been a confident person but the diagnosis hit him hard.

"Many people are just not aware of the toll that heart disease takes on a person, mentally and emotionally," he explains. "Your whole life on this planet is all of a sudden at extreme risk. I think it takes a lot of courage, determination and will-power to face it."

If you continue to feel down or anxious, talk to your doctor. You may be referred to a psychologist, counsellor or psychiatrist who can help you talk through some of your concerns. You may also benefit from taking medication for depression and/or anxiety.

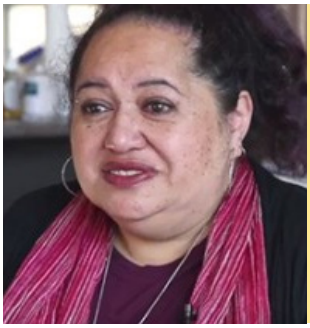
The Mental Health Foundation produces resources on depression, anxiety and stress. You can find out more on their website: **mentalhealth.org.nz**

Keeping your relationships strong

Family/whānau and other loved ones may struggle to come to terms with your health scare. They might feel worried that you could have another heart attack. It is important for you to recognise that many of the feelings you and your family/whānau experience are common reactions to a heart attack.

Make sure that you and your family/whānau can talk honestly and freely about what they're feeling. No one, including children, should be excluded from the conversation. You may not be aware that children can often blame themselves when their parents become unwell, so it is important to explain to them what has happened and why it has happened.

Having open and honest conversations can lower your stress and encourage the closeness and emotional support that heart attack survivors need.



Chess's partner and daughter were very worried about her after her heart attack.

"My family got a bit of a shock. It's probably the first time I saw my partner afraid. And he cried, which made me want to cry. I was trying really hard while I was in hospital, not to give in to that."

Julie worried about her partner having another heart attack when he first left hospital.

"When he first came home, I was really scared and I thought 'what do I do, how do I look after a heart patient?'" she explains. "It's like living with a volcano, I'm afraid to say anything in case he goes off!"

Lowering my risk and staying well

A heart attack is a symptom of coronary artery disease, which is a life-long condition. There are choices you can make to lower your risk of having another heart attack and to stay well.

There are a number of factors that are known to increase your risk of heart disease.

Some risk factors you can't do anything about, including age, ethnicity, gender, personal or family history of heart attack or stroke. But there are other risk factors that you can change.

Choices you can make to lower your risk of another heart attack

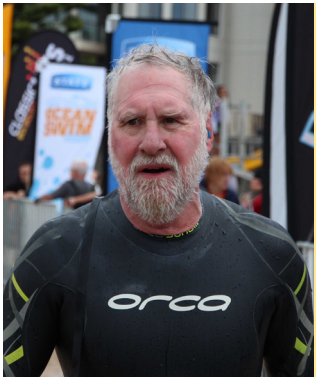
Stop smoking

Take medications

Make heart healthy eating and drinking choices

Move more

Lose weight



"I've always been fairly active, but now I either walk or swim daily."

A year after his heart attack, **John** joined an ocean swimming group.

"I've done about eight Ocean Swims now - most of them 3.3 km. My swimming friends gave me lots of tips about sea swimming and being in a group boosted my confidence."

Stop smoking

Becoming smokefree is the best thing you can do for your heart.

You are more likely to successfully stop smoking if you get help. Using stop smoking services and medications can double your chances of being smokefree in the long-term. Talk to your doctor, nurse or pharmacist about options to help you quit.

Phone, online and text-to-quit

Local one-on-one or group support programme

Patches, lozenges and/or gum

Other medications

Phone Quitline on **0800 778 778** or visit **quit.org.nz** for more information about support to stop smoking

Take medications

Remember to ask questions about the medication you are taking.

When taking your medication, you need to understand:

- what the medication does
- how to take your medication
- why you are on the medication
- what unwanted side effects you should look out for.

There are things you can do to help you remember when you need to take your medication. You may like to:

Set reminders on your cellphone

Talk to your pharmacist about a blister pack

Make heart healthy eating and drinking choices

Heart healthy eating is all about balancing the different types of food you eat to get a range of nutrients. Try balancing your day's eating like this:

CUT BACK ON junk foods, takeaways & foods or drinks high in sugar, salt or saturated & trans fats

Follow these simple steps to help you make realistic changes to what you eat and to improve your heart health:

1. Share and enjoy meals with family and friends that focus mostly on foods close to how they are found in nature.

2. Include plenty of colourful non-starchy* vegetables and/or fruit at every meal and for most snacks.

3. Choose whole grain foods in place of refined grains.

4. Include some legumes, fish or seafood, eggs, skinless chicken or lean meat at one or two meals each day.

5. Use mostly reduced-fat or low-fat milk and milk products (or non-dairy options with calcium added).

6. Choose healthy oils, nuts and seeds instead of animal and coconut fats.

7. Drink water to quench thirst, and limit sugary drinks and alcohol.

8. When preparing meals, snacks or drinks, use pepper, herbs, spices or fruit to add flavour rather than using salt or sugar.

9. Cut back on junk foods, takeaways and foods high in sugar, salt or saturated and trans fats.

*Does not include starchy vegetables like potatoes, Māori potatoes, kūmara, corn, parsnip, yams, cassava/tapioca, green banana and taro

Move more

Building more exercise into your day is easy – start with one of our simple steps.

Take the stairs not the lift

Get off the bus one stop early and walk

Get in the pool and try walking in water

Deliver a message to a co-worker in person instead of sending an email

Jump on your bike and cycle around the neighbourhood

Do jobs around the house like gardening or vacuuming

Aim to work up to 30 minutes a day of moderate exercise, starting with ten minute blocks. You should be breathing a little faster but still be able to talk comfortably. If you are too breathless to talk, then it's time to slow down. If you are able to sing or whistle, then step up the pace.

Lose weight

You can make small changes today to help manage your weight. It's about balancing what you eat and drink with the energy you burn through keeping active.

Make healthier food choices

Keep active and move more

Set a goal with support from family/whānau or a health professional

Making a change

You have an important role to play in your health.

After reading through this section, there may be one or more things you'd like to do to lower your chance of having another heart attack. Have a conversation with your doctor or nurse about any changes you're thinking about.

Reasons to stay the same

What is good about staying the same?

What worries me about making a change?

Reasons to make change

What worries me about staying the same?

What is good about making a change?

How important is it to you to make a change?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not important ⟷ **Very important**

If making a change is less important to you than a 7, try finding a more important change that you would like to make.

Setting a goal

The first step is deciding if you are ready to make this change. Here are some tips to help get you started and make it easier to continue with the changes.

- Work out one thing you would like to change – this will be your goal.
- Take small steps to achieve your goal – start with steps you can do easily.
- Set a time to review how your goal is going. Once you get used to this change, set yourself a new goal.
- Get support – ask your family/whānau and friends to help you.
- Make a plan.

My plan for change

What do you want to change first?

My SMART goal is:

Try setting a SMART goal. This means what you want to do should be:

S pecific
M easurable
A chievable
R ealistic, and have a
T ime-frame

What small steps will you take to achieve this goal?

How sure are you that you can do this?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not sure ⟷ **Very sure**

If it is less than 7, think about what it would take to increase your confidence, or think about starting with a smaller step.

Who could help you to achieve your goal?

For example, your family/whānau may want to make changes with you.

What other support would help you achieve your goal?

For example, community support groups, dietitian.

What might get in the way of you achieving your goal?

How will you overcome these problems?

How did it go in your first week? Was it easy to do, or do you need more time on this step?

How did it go the next week? Are you ready to do something more?

Continue with your goals until they become a part of your normal life.

Recognising another heart attack

After having a heart attack, you are at risk of having another one. Many people do not recognise their next heart attack, as it may feel different to the first one. Every heart attack is different.

If you or someone else experience chest discomfort (with or without nausea, sweating or shortness of breath), **call 111 immediately**.

When **Julie's** partner had a second heart attack, she had to convince him to let her call an ambulance.

"He kept saying to me, no it's not another heart attack... but then it was. A lot of people think that after you've had one heart attack, they won't have another one. [My partner] is living proof that you can."

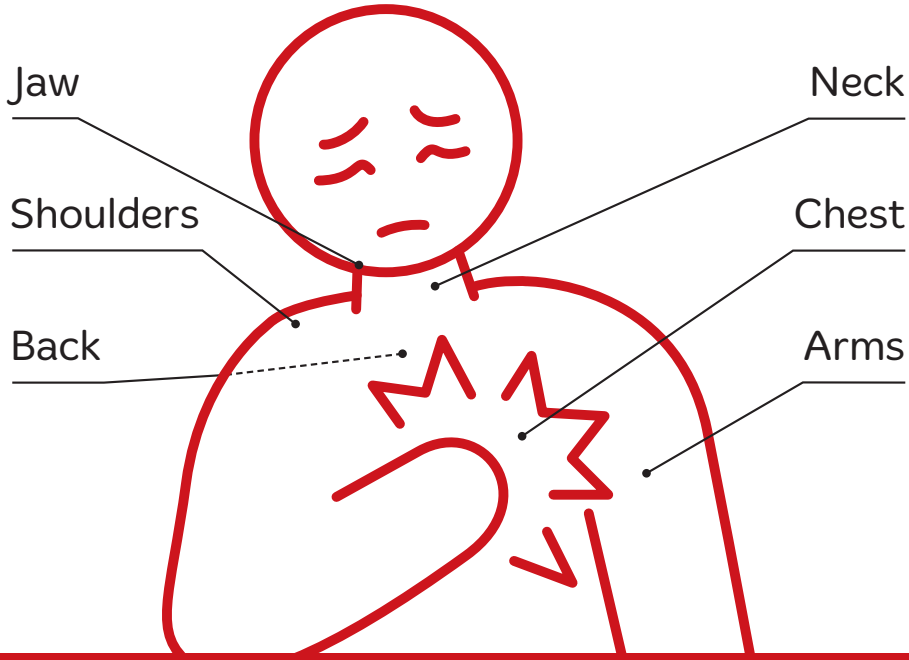
Take our heart attack warning signs quiz
heartfoundation.org.nz/haws-quiz

Heart attack warning signs

Know these signs and symptoms

Heart Foundation

Pain or discomfort in any of these areas:



You may also feel:

Dizzy or lightheaded

Short of breath

Sweaty

Sick

You may be having a heart attack.

Call 111

Hearts fit for life

The Heart Foundation is the charity that works to stop all people in New Zealand dying prematurely from heart disease and enable people with heart disease to live full lives.

Visit our website **heartfoundation.org.nz** to find out how to:

- join information and support sessions
- share your story
- ask questions.

To speak with a nurse about your condition, call our Heart Helpline 0800 863 375.

If you would like to help people living with heart disease, please consider donating.

To donate:

Visit: heartfoundation.org.nz/donate

Phone: 0800 830 100

Heart Foundation, PO Box 17160, Greenlane, Auckland 1546
T 0800 863 375 **F** 09 571 9190 **E** info@heartfoundation.org.nz

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