



# Patient education: What can go wrong after a heart attack? (The Basics)

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## Why can problems happen after a heart attack?

Problems can happen because part of the heart is damaged during a heart attack. This can cause the heart to beat abnormally. The damage can also lead to problems with the heart walls or valves ( [figure 1](#)).

Whether or not problems happen after a heart attack and how serious they are depends on:

- How serious the heart attack was, how much of the heart was damaged, and which part of the heart was damaged
- How quickly the heart attack was treated

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## What problems can happen after a heart attack?

Different problems can happen in the days to weeks after a heart attack. Some problems are not too serious and can be treated, but others can cause death.

The most common problems that can happen after a heart attack are:

- **Abnormal heart rhythms** – Each person has a built-in electrical system in the heart that controls their heartbeat. After a heart attack, the electrical signals that control the heartbeat can become abnormal and cause an abnormal heart rhythm. Abnormal heart rhythms are also called "arrhythmias."

An abnormal heart rhythm can make people feel like their heart is racing, skipping beats, or beating out of sync. An abnormal heart rhythm can also cause dizziness, fainting, or even death.

Treatment depends on the type of abnormal rhythm and the person's symptoms and can include:

- "Watching and waiting" – If your abnormal heart rhythm isn't too serious, the doctor might watch it to see if it goes away on its own.
- Different types of medicines
- "Cardioversion" – This procedure involves applying an electrical current to the heart to fix its rhythm.
- A device that can sense and treat abnormal heartbeats or heart rhythms – These can be temporary or permanent. Temporary devices include wearable vests. Permanent devices include pacemakers and implantable cardioverter-defibrillators ("ICDs"). Permanent devices go under a person's skin near the heart ( [figure 2](#)).
- **Heart failure** – This is a condition in which the heart does not pump as well as it should. This can cause symptoms such as swelling ( [figure 3](#)), trouble breathing, and feeling tired. Sometimes, heart failure after a heart attack lasts only for a short time. Other times, heart failure after a heart attack becomes a long-term problem.

Doctors can treat heart failure with different types of medicines. The medicines can improve symptoms and help people feel better. Some medicines help people live longer. Most people need to take more than 1 medicine every day.

- **Inflammation of the lining around the heart** – Doctors call this "pericarditis." It can cause chest pain that gets worse when you cough or take a deep breath. Sometimes, it also causes a fever.

If you have pericarditis, your doctor will probably first treat it by increasing your daily dose of [aspirin](#). (After a heart attack, most people take aspirin every day.) They might also prescribe another medicine to decrease the inflammation, such as an NSAID or [colchicine](#). NSAIDs are a large group of medicines that include aspirin, [ibuprofen](#) (sample brand names: Advil, Motrin), [indomethacin](#) (sample brand names: Indocin, Indocid), and [naproxen](#) (sample brand names: Aleve, Naprosyn).

If the inflammation causes fluid to collect around your heart, your doctor might drain the fluid.

Other problems can happen after a heart attack, but they are much less common. These problems usually happen within the first few days after a heart attack and can be life-threatening. They include:

- Tears in the heart muscle or heart walls
- Problems with the heart valves
- Blood clots in the lung
- Strokes

These problems usually cause sudden and severe symptoms, such as sudden trouble breathing or passing out. They need emergency treatment, which might include medicines, surgery, or other procedures. But these problems can't always be treated and sometimes lead to death.

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## More on this topic

[Patient education: Heart attack \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Heart attack – Discharge instructions \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Medicines after a heart attack \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Heart failure \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Medicines for heart failure with reduced ejection fraction \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Mitral regurgitation \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Stroke \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Deep vein thrombosis \(blood clot in the leg\) \(The Basics\)](#)

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[Patient education: Catheter ablation for the heart \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Implantable cardioverter-defibrillators \(The Basics\)](#)

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[Patient education: Lowering the risk of a blood clot \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Pericardial effusion \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Heart attack \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

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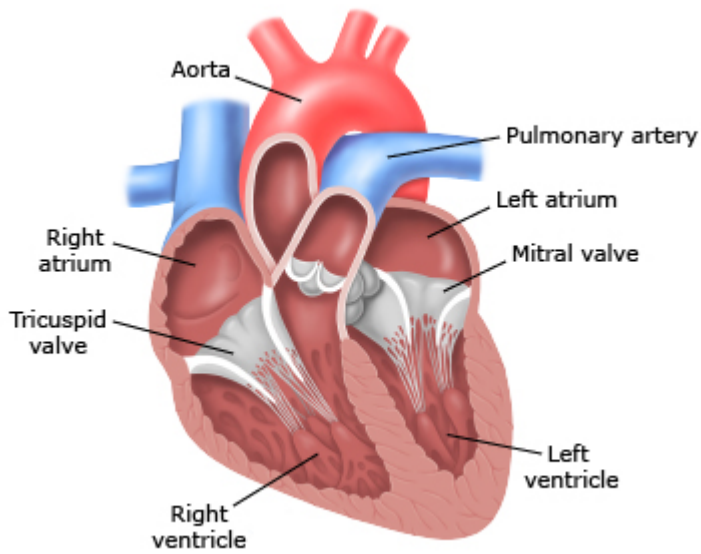
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Topic 16434 Version 18.0

## GRAPHICS

### Normal heart

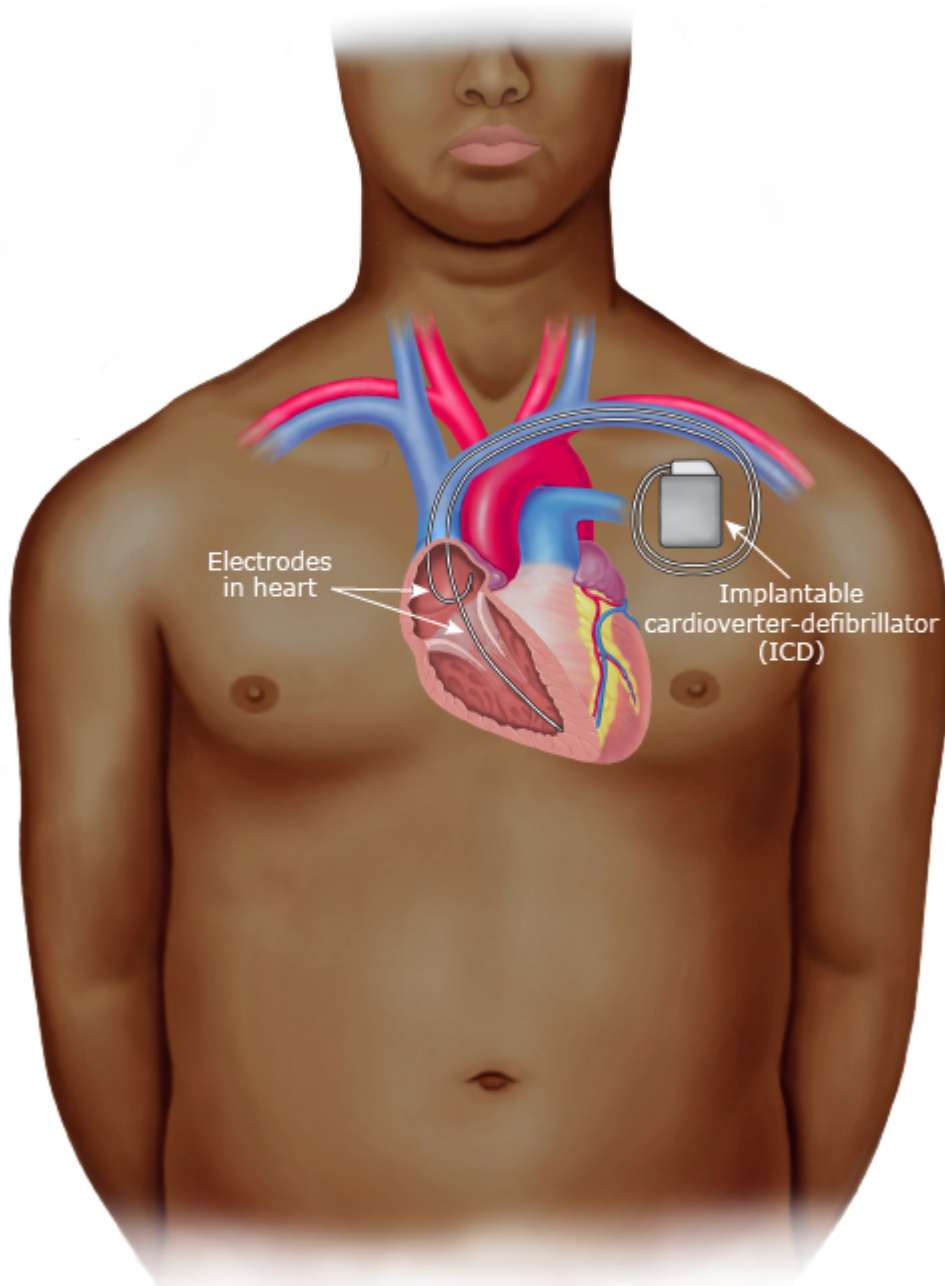


This is a drawing of a normal heart. The heart has 4 chambers: right atrium, left atrium, right ventricle, and left ventricle. Blood flows from the right atrium to the right ventricle through the tricuspid valve. Blood flows from the left atrium to the left ventricle through the mitral valve.

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Graphic 56936 Version 4.0

## Implantable cardioverter-defibrillator (ICD)



An ICD sits under the skin near a person's heart.

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Graphic 129613 Version 2.0

## Pitting edema



"Edema" means swelling. It happens when fluid collects in small spaces around tissues and organs inside the body.

Sometimes, pushing on the swollen area can leave a temporary dimple or dent in the skin. This is called "pitting edema."

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Graphic 61706 Version 13.0

