HEART ATTACK or SUDDEN CARDIAC ARREST?

These two terms are often confused by people, as many don’t know, or understand, the difference between them. The two terms are often used interchangeably, and people do not realise they are distinctly different.

A heart attack occurs when the blood vessels carrying oxygenated blood to the heart become blocked. Sudden cardiac arrest occurs when the heart suddenly and unexpectedly stops beating.

A heart attack is a ‘plumbing’ issue whereas sudden cardiac arrest is an ‘electrical’ issue.

HEART ATTACK

Symptoms of a heart attack (or myocardial infarction, MI) can vary from person to person, and in discomfort from minor to severe.

Symptoms can include:
- pressure, tightness, pain or a squeezing sensation in the chest
- nausea, indigestion, heartburn or abdominal pain
- shortness of breath, coughing, wheezing
- light headedness/sudden dizziness
- fatigue
- cold sweat, feeling sick
- overwhelming sense of anxiety

It is possible to experience a heart attack without the associated chest pain. Most heart attacks are caused by coronary heart disease (CHD). A heart attack occurs when the blood supply to part of the heart stops, this is usually due to a blockage either by a blood clot or something similar. Many people experience warning signs and symptoms prior to having a heart attack, these can be hours, days or weeks in advance. In some cases, a heart attack will precede a sudden cardiac arrest (SCA). If you suspect that you, or someone near you, is experiencing a heart attack, the most important thing to remember is to stay calm, act fast and call for an ambulance.

SUDDEN CARDIAC ARREST

In cases of sudden cardiac arrest there is rarely any warning signs or pre-emptive symptoms and the patient always loses consciousness.

Symptoms can include:
- unresponsiveness
- loss of consciousness
- lack of pulse
- cessation of breathing
- abnormal heart rhythm

Sudden cardiac arrest (SCA) is caused by an abnormal heart rhythm; the heart stops beating, and the person stops breathing. When this happens, blood stops flowing to the brain and other vital organs. Time is crucial to somebody experiencing a sudden cardiac arrest event. If you suspect somebody is having a SCA you must immediately phone for an ambulance, administer CPR and (ideally) use an automated external defibrillator (AED). For every minute that defibrillation is delayed, the victim’s chance of survival decreases by 10% and without immediate treatment 90 – 95% of SCA victims will die. Early defibrillation makes a huge difference and can achieve survival rates as high as 50-70%.

By knowing and fully understanding the difference between a heart attack and sudden cardiac arrest you can be prepared for either event, if it were to unfortunately arise. Heart attacks and sudden cardiac arrest events should be treated very differently and it is important to know the steps required to ensure survival.