

Recognising Heart Attacks, Strokes and Heart Failure during the Coronavirus pandemic and beyond

- Professor Ahmet Fuat GP and GP Specialist in cardiology

We are hearing that fewer people are being seen in hospital with heart attacks, strokes and heart failure in recent weeks, which suggests that people are not seeking help when they should do. If you have any of the symptoms described below, you should call 000.

Stroke strikes every nine minutes in Australia. It can happen to anyone, of any age, at any time. It is more common if you have poorly controlled high blood pressure, diabetes or if you have an irregular heart rhythm disorder called Atrial Fibrillation. It is vital to know how to spot the warning signs of a stroke in yourself or someone else. Using the FAST test is the best way to do this.

Signs of stroke - **FAST** test

Face: Facial weakness. Can the person smile? Has their face fallen on one side?

Arms: Arm weakness. Can the person raise both arms and keep them there?

Speech problems: Can the person speak clearly and understand what you say? Is their speech slurred?

Time: If you see any of these three signs, it's time to **call 000**.

There is no way of knowing if symptoms will pass or get better when they first start, so you need to seek immediate medical help. A stroke is a medical emergency. Always dial **000**. The quicker the person arrives at a specialist stroke unit, the quicker they will receive appropriate treatment

The **FAST** test helps to spot the three most common symptoms of stroke. But there are other signs that you should always take seriously. These include:

- Sudden weakness or numbness on one side of the body, including legs, hands or feet.
- Difficulty finding words or speaking in clear sentences.
- Sudden blurred vision or loss of sight in one or both eyes.
- Sudden memory loss or confusion, and dizziness or a sudden fall.
- A sudden, severe headache.

If you spot any of these signs of a stroke, do not wait. Call 000 straight away.

Ambulance paramedics are trained in stroke, and will take the person to the best hospital for specialist treatment.



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Symptoms of a heart attack

Heart attack symptoms vary from person to person.

They can include:

- Pain or discomfort in your chest that happens suddenly and does not go away.
- Pain that spreads to your left or right arm, or to your neck, jaw, back or stomach. For some people the pain or tightness is severe, while for others it is uncomfortable
- Feeling sick, sweaty, light-headed or short of breath.

It is possible to have a heart attack without experiencing all these symptoms, and it is important to remember everyone experiences pain differently. This is common in the elderly or people with diabetes, as the condition can cause nerve damage which affects how you feel pain.

What should I do if I think I am having a heart attack?

It's important you get medical attention immediately. Do not worry about 'wasting' paramedics' time – a heart attack is a medical emergency.

You should:

- call 000 for an ambulance
- sit down and stay calm
- take a 300mg aspirin if you have one within reach
- wait for the paramedics.

What is Heart Failure?

Heart failure is a condition where the heart does not pump blood around the body in sufficient quantities or strength to nourish the body tissues.

It is more common as you get older, if you have had a heart attack that damages heart muscle (one of the reasons why you should seek help urgently), if you have poorly controlled diabetes, high blood pressure, smoke, drink too much alcohol or have an irregular heart rhythm called Atrial Fibrillation.

Patients can present with increasing swelling of feet, ankles or lower legs, shortness of breath on walking, climbing stairs and sometimes lying flat in bed and some wake up suddenly from sleep struggling to breathe and coughing up frothy sputum.

If you are getting any of these symptoms please contact your GP for assessment and tests, most of which can be done at the GP surgery. Do not delay because of fear of coronavirus because if diagnosed and treated early this can improve your symptoms, stop it getting worse and keep you out of hospital.

Heart palpitations

Heart palpitations are heartbeats that suddenly become more noticeable. Your heart may feel like it is pounding, fluttering or beating irregularly, often for just a few seconds or minutes. You may also feel these sensations in your throat or neck. Palpitations may seem alarming, but in most cases they are harmless and are not normally a sign of a serious problem. Sometimes you may feel an extra or missed beat. These are known as ectopic beats and are also usually nothing to worry about.

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When to see a GP

You do not usually need to see or speak to a GP if the palpitations pass quickly and only happen occasionally. They are unlikely to be caused by a serious problem and probably will not need treatment.

But it is a good idea to see a GP if:

- the palpitations last a long time, do not improve or get worse
- you have a history of heart problems
- you are concerned about the palpitations

To help find the cause, a GP may:

- ask about your symptoms and medical history
- arrange a blood test
- carry out an electrocardiogram (ECG) to check your heart rhythm (if the GP has the equipment available)

If you cannot have an ECG at the GP surgery or the GP wants to arrange heart monitoring over a longer time period, you may be referred for tests at a local hospital.

When to get emergency help

Call 000 for an ambulance or go to your nearest A&E if you have heart palpitations and any of the following symptoms:

- severe shortness of breath
- chest pain or tightness
- dizziness or light-headedness
- fainting or blackouts (www.stars.org.uk)

These symptoms could indicate a serious or potentially life-threatening heart problem that should be checked by a doctor straight away.

Should I still call 000 or go to hospital if I'm worried about my health?

Whether or not you have coronavirus symptoms, it is essential to dial 000 if you have symptoms that could be a heart attack or a stroke, or if your heart symptoms get worse.

Do not delay because you think hospitals are too busy - the Australian health system still has structures in place to treat people for heart attacks and strokes.

You will be kept apart from patients suffering from suspected or confirmed coronavirus, making it very unlikely you will become infected. If you delay, you are more likely to suffer serious heart damage and more likely to need intensive care and to spend longer in hospital.

