

## Can You Spot a Heart Attack?

Damar Hamlin, the football player who collapsed on the field during a widely televised football game did not have a heart attack as many people reported on social media. He experienced “*commotio cordis*,” a rare event causing cardiac arrest from a blow to the chest. It was the perfect storm. Not all victims who collapse from cardiac arrest have a heart attack; but all who collapse with cardiac arrest, regardless of the cause need immediate cardio-pulmonary-resuscitation (CPR) and prompt notification of emergency services by calling 9-1-1. Cardiac arrest *may be caused* by a massive heart attack, but it can also be caused from any event that causes the victim to stop breathing, such as drowning, choking, opioid overdoses, or severe asthma. The value of CPR education is immeasurable. It is a crucial piece of the survival chain for cardiac arrest, and it’s what saved Damar Hamlin.

Heart disease is a leading cause of death for all genders, and it refers to many conditions associated with the heart. Coronary artery disease (CAD) is the most common condition that leads to a heart attack, and it’s caused by blockages in the arteries that nourish the heart. The blockages are also referred to as “atherosclerosis,” or plaque build-up inside the artery. The result is deprivation of vital oxygen-rich blood to the heart muscle which leads to a heart attack. Other heart conditions include structural defects that are present from birth, valve disease, heart failure, and problems with the electrical system in the heart.

The experience of a heart attack is one of the more common manifestations of heart disease. Most people likely recognize the classic sign of a heart attack, which is a fist clenched over the chest. The symptom of chest pain from a heart attack can be described in a variety of ways, and for some may include no “pain” at all. Rather, it is described as chest pressure, or squeezing, heaviness, crushing, fullness, burning, or an indigestion-type sensation. The chest discomfort may spread to the arms, back, shoulder blades or jaw. It may also be accompanied by trouble breathing, nausea or vomiting, lightheadedness or a change in skin color to a pale or greyish tone. An individual may not know that they have CAD. They may go see their doctor for a reported change in endurance, or increased shortness of breath with activity. An exercise stress test should be ordered by their doctor to see if CAD if the source for this change. If any of the above symptoms occur, don’t wait: Call 911 and get to the closest emergency department (ED).

For women or diabetics, the symptoms may be less evident than those exhibited in men. Woman may experience a milder discomfort in the chest. As a triage nurse in the emergency department, I’ve heard women report a mild ache, an unusual pain in the jaw, a toothache, or simply felt that something “is off.” People who are diabetics may have changes in their perception of pain because of the damage that high blood sugar can inflict upon the nerves in a body. Their symptoms may not follow those of a “classic” heart attack. The “super-agers,” aged 85 and older, may not experience any symptoms consistent with a heart attack. A caregiver may notice a decrease in appetite or a change in their mental state. It’s better to be safe than

sorry. Call your doctor or go to the nearest emergency department if you or a loved one experiences any worrisome symptoms that are a change from normal for the individual.

The best way to prevent CAD, the precursor to a heart attack, is to be aware of and manage your risk factors. Risk factors include uncontrolled high cholesterol levels and blood pressure, sedentary lifestyle, diabetes, nicotine use and strong family history. Young athletes should undergo sports physicals that include an electrocardiogram (EKG) to look for underlying conditions that could cause cardiac arrest. People of color are at higher risk of heart disease due to adverse social factors. Barriers to equal access to care must be addressed. The good news is that heart disease, particularly CAD, can be managed with lifestyle changes and medical therapy from a trusted physician. Check with your local hospital system or insurance carrier if they can recommend any classes in the community that provide educational opportunities to improve your risk factors. Add heart healthy foods to your diet, take a walk, breathe deeply, and rest assured that you can control your risk factors and get beyond your disease!

Please refer to the American Heart Association's ([heart.org](http://heart.org)) and the American Diabetes Association's ([diabetes.org](http://diabetes.org)) web pages for more detailed information. The American Red Cross is a great resource for CPR training. ([redcross.org](http://redcross.org))