

Heart Facts

GLOSSARY OF CARDIAC CARE TERMS

The following glossary includes terms that will help your understanding of cardiac care. Please note that the glossary is separated into two sections: “Diagnosis” and “Treatment.”

Diagnosis

angina – chest discomfort caused by reduced blood flow to the heart muscle; a serious warning sign; duration can progress from brief and only present during intense exercise, to extremely frequent and present even when resting; may feel like a pressure or squeezing tightness; symptoms can also include pain down arms and in the neck or jaw.

angiography – injection of a contrast agent into coronary arteries, permitting a moving X-ray image of blood flow through these vessels to find narrowed or blocked areas.

arrhythmia – irregularity in your heart rhythm; sometimes felt as fluttery or jumpy heart; often giving no symptoms.

blood-flow perfusion imaging scan – a means of measuring blood flow to the heart during a stress test; an injected radioactive substance is taken up by working heart muscles receiving good circulation; areas of the heart that are damaged or have poor blood flow show up as “cold spots” on the resulting images; also used to measure effectiveness of treatments to restore blood flow.

cardiac catheterization – process in which slender plastic tubes are injected into an artery in the groin or arm and then threaded up to the arteries that supply the heart for purposes of diagnostic or treatment procedures.

cardiac event recording – beat-to-beat ECG recordings recorded continuously or intermittently over a period of 24 hours or longer; used to detect abnormal heart rhythms.

complications – additional medical conditions that arise during, or as a result of, diagnostic or treatment procedures or in the course of your illness.

congestive heart failure – a group of symptoms resulting from the heart’s inability to fill or pump normally, which can be due to a variety of causes; symptoms can include shortness of breath, swelling and fatigue.

coronary artery disease – atherosclerosis, or hardening and narrowing of the arteries that supply blood to the heart muscle (walls of the heart), due to fatty deposits (plaque); heart tissue does not receive enough blood, depriving it of oxygen and nutrients; can lead to angina or heart attack.

echocardiography – diagnostic test using ultrasound waves to create a motion picture of your heart’s internal structure; can reveal narrowed or leaking valves, abnormal heart wall motion and increased heart size.

electrical mapping – electrodes placed temporarily inside the heart via cardiac catheterization, reveal points in the heart’s electrical system that can cause cardiac arrhythmias and conduction problems.

electrocardiogram (ECG) – a measure of electrical activity of the heart, recorded by a machine called an electrocardiograph and used to detect disorders such as irregular heart rhythms and previous heart attack.

exercise stress testing – ECG and blood pressure are monitored before, during and after physical exertion on the treadmill, to test for the presence of heart disease and to estimate exercise tolerance; some tests are accompanied by images of the heart by echocardiography or perfusion imaging.

heart attack – damage to the heart muscle; always a serious event, whether mild or severe; usually caused by blockages in the coronary arteries; symptoms may be similar to angina but more intense, including a gripping, crushing discomfort or heaviness just behind the breast bone; symptoms may radiate to jaw, abdomen or back; may be accompanied by shortness of breath, paleness, cold sweat and intense fear.

invasive testing – tests that use instruments, catheters or other medical diagnostic equipment introduced into your body; often involves receiving a local anesthetic, sedation and analgesic.

morbidity – medical term for illness, used for comparing illness rates from diseases or after procedures.

mortality – medical term for death, used for comparing death rates from diseases after procedures at hospitals.

non-invasive tests – diagnostic procedures that do not require the introduction of any instruments into your body.

radionuclide ventriculography (RVG) – a radioactive agent is injected into your bloodstream; in your heart, its emissions permit images that reveal how effectively the heart is pumping; confirms heart function.

Treatment

angioplasty – most common invasive treatment for coronary artery disease; performed during cardiac catheterization; cardiologist threads a wire through the catheterization tube to the site of coronary artery narrowing or blockage; the device has a tiny balloon tip that is inflated to press plaque back and open the artery; other device tips may allow the cardiologist to cut the plaque away (atherectomy) or burn it away (laser); the angioplasty team uses angiography to monitor progress of the procedure; requires sedation, local anesthetic and analgesics, and is used primarily to relieve angina and other symptoms of heart disease, especially those that occur during exertion; commonly accompanied by stenting.

coronary bypass graft surgery – most common form of open-heart surgery; used to treat coronary artery disease; the surgeon constructs an alternate path, or bypass, for blood around the narrowed or blocked part of the coronary artery, with a section of blood vessel from another part of the body; the procedure, which requires general anesthesia, is used primarily to relieve angina and other symptoms of heart disease and, in some cases, to reduce morbidity and mortality of coronary disease.

defibrillator – implanted device that monitors the heart and shocks it back to normal if it develops an electrically unstable, life-threatening rhythm.

medical treatment – consists of a combination of lifestyle counseling and drug treatment.

pacemaker – implanted device that monitors the heart and delivers electrical pulses to allow it to beat normally when slow heart rates and conduction problems occur.

radiofrequency ablation – cardiac electrophysiologists insert catheters inside the heart that transmit and convert radiofrequency energy to heat, disrupting problem areas in the heart's electrical system; used to treat arrhythmias.

stent – a tiny mesh tube that the cardiologist can expand, via cardiac catheterization, inside a coronary artery to help prevent recurrence of blockage.

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