

Pericarditis

What is pericarditis?

Pericarditis is a condition in which the pericardium becomes inflamed. The pericardium is the thin membrane that covers the heart. It is made up of tissue that is loose enough to allow the heart to move and change in size.

How does it occur?

Inflammation of the membrane around the heart can be caused by:

- infection, usually by a virus
- injury to the heart
- rheumatic fever
- heart attack
- connective tissue disease, such as lupus
- cancer.

Sometimes a cause cannot be found.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of pericarditis include:

- sharp chest pain that gets worse when you take a deep breath, change your position, or start coughing
- pain when you swallow (if the back part of the heart covering is inflamed)
- fever
- pain that lessens when you sit up or lean forward
- tiredness
- shortness of breath.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will examine you and take your medical history. The most important sign of pericarditis is an unusual sound that your provider hears with a stethoscope. Your provider may also order the following tests:

- chest X-ray
- ECG (electrocardiogram) to measure and record the electrical activity of your heart
- echocardiogram, which is a cardiac ultrasound scan that uses high-frequency sound to get a picture of the heart
- blood tests
- tuberculin skin tests.

How is it treated?

The treatment is usually nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). These medicines calm down the inflammation of the pericardium.

If you have a fever:

- Stay in bed if your temperature is over 100° F (37.8°C). After your temperature has fallen below 100° F (37.8°C), become as active as you comfortably can.
- Keep a record of your daily temperature.

How long will the effects last?

It may take a few days to several weeks to get better.

The space between the inner and outer layers of the pericardium may fill with excess fluid, causing pressure on the heart and affecting its ability to pump blood properly. This condition, called cardiac tamponade, may require removal of the fluid.

If the inflammation lasts a long time, the pericardium may become scarred and stiff. The stiffness may interfere with the way the heart fills with blood. This may cause a drop in blood pressure, trouble breathing, swelling in the neck veins, and edema (swelling in the tissues of the legs). This condition is called constrictive pericarditis. It may require surgery.

How can I prevent pericarditis from recurring?

Most of the causes of pericarditis are not easily prevented.

[Related Topics]

Cardiac Tamponade

Developed by RelayHealth

Published by RelayHealth.

© 2008 RelayHealth and/or one of its affiliates. All Rights Reserved.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.