

What is the definition of a “broken heart”?

Every February we think of hearts as Valentine’s Day nears and we honour the loves in our lives. Unfortunately, some may endure the emotional pain of a broken heart due to a failed relationship.

Broken hearts, from a purely physical perspective, are a little different. We hear the terms, heart attack or cardiac arrest, but do you really know what they mean and what the difference is?

A heart attack happens when heart muscle tissue dies because its supply of oxygenated blood has been cut off. Usually, a blood clot gets stuck in a coronary artery that has been narrowed through atherosclerosis. The supply of blood is cut off and the heart tissue beyond the clot is starved of oxygen. If the heart attack damages the heart’s electrical system, or if a lot of the heart muscle is affected, the heart may stop beating properly. This is cardiac arrest. (First Aid Reference Guide St. John Ambulance, 2011)

A heart attack casualty generally remains conscious unless the condition progresses into cardiac arrest. They must receive immediate treatment in order to ensure minimal damage to the heart.

#### How to Help

Ensure the area is safe for you and the casualty. Ask the casualty:

“Can you show me where it hurts?”

“Have you had this pain before?”

“Do you have medication for this pain?”



As soon as you recognize the signs and symptoms of a heart attack, call, or have a bystander call 911 to get medical help. Make the casualty comfortable (semi-sitting may be the best). Help them take prescribed medication if they have some.

If the casualty has no prescribed medication or there is no relief after the first dose of prescribed medication, ask the casualty if he has any allergies to ASA (aka Aspirin™) or if a doctor has ever told him not to take ASA. If not, suggest he (or she) chew 1 regular ASA tablet or two low does ASA tablets.

Cardiac arrest is different than a heart attack although sometimes, heart attacks are the cause. In cardiac arrest, the heart fails to contract effectively, preventing the normal circulation of the blood. After four minutes without oxygen, brains can become permanently impaired. The good news is cardiac arrest is potentially reversible if treated early with CPR, defibrillation and advanced cardiac care.

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