



American Heart Association®

Addressing Recurrent Pericarditis

IS IT RECURRENT PERICARDITIS?

Pericarditis is inflammation of the pericardium, a sac-like structure made of two thin layers of tissue that surround and protect the heart.

The pericardium holds the heart in place, protects it from infection and prevents it from filling with too much blood. It also shields the heart from outside pressure. A small amount of fluid between the layers reduces friction as the heart beats.

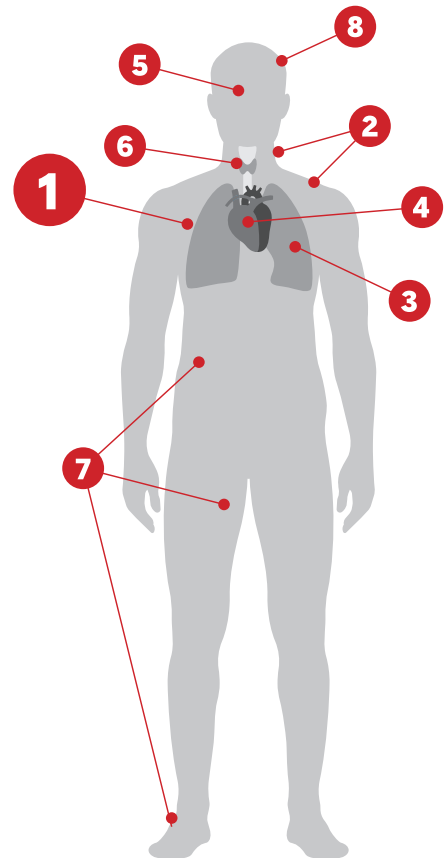
In people with pericarditis, these tissues become inflamed and irritated, which causes sharp chest pain. The chest also can feel achy, under pressure or uncomfortable if fluid builds up around the heart, leading to difficulty breathing or rapid breathing and coughing.

Up to 30% of people experience “recurrent” pericarditis, meaning they have another flare (an episode of inflammation in the pericardium) — or even several — after at least four weeks of being symptom-free.

Symptoms of pericarditis can be the same regardless of how many times you’ve had it, but most people experience some combination of these common symptoms.

1. Chest pain: This is the most common symptom and almost always present. It might feel like a sharp, stabbing pain that radiates to the arm, neck, shoulder, back or abdomen. It can also feel like a dull ache or pressure in the chest. **Some people think they’re having a heart attack.** The pain worsens when coughing, taking deep breaths or lying down, and might improve by sitting up and leaning forward.

- 2.** Back, neck or shoulder pain radiating from the chest pain.
- 3.** Shortness of breath or trouble breathing. This can be subtle.
- 4.** Heart palpitations, such as a “fluttering” feeling, or a faster than normal heartbeat.
- 5.** Low-grade fever, chills or sweating.
- 6.** Dry cough.
- 7.** Swollen abdomen, legs or feet.
- 8.** Lightheadedness, dizziness or fainting.
- 9.** Weakness or fatigue.



If you have chest pain, you should always call 911 in case you are having a heart attack or other cardiac emergency. Even if you have other symptoms that don’t feel like an emergency or you assume you have another case of pericarditis, you should still see a doctor to be properly diagnosed and treated.

Be sure to tell your doctor if you’ve had any of these symptoms. Note that many people with pericarditis report being misdiagnosed with acid reflux or heartburn. **Women, in particular, report being wrongly diagnosed with panic attacks, stress or anxiety.**

Visit heart.org/recurrentpericarditis for more information.