

Chest Pain

Causes

- Most persistent chest pain is from a hacking cough. Coughing can cause sore muscles in the chest wall, upper abdomen or diaphragm.
- Occasionally, chest pain follows strenuous exercise (e.g., throwing a baseball), lifting (e.g., weights or heavy boxes), or work that involves the upper body (e.g., digging). This type of muscle soreness often increases with movement of the shoulders.
- Heartburn is due to reflux of stomach contents. It usually causes a burning discomfort under the lower sternum (breastbone).
- Most brief chest pain lasting minutes is from harmless muscle cramps or a pinched nerve.
- Heart disease is hardly ever the cause of chest pain in children.

Care Advice

Treatment for Sore Muscle Pain

1. **REASSURANCE:**
 - a. Chest pains in children lasting for a few minutes are usually harmless muscle cramps. They need no treatment.
 - b. Chest pains (sore muscles) from vigorous exercise or work using the upper body usually start soon after the activity and need the following treatment.
2. **PAIN MEDICINE:** Give acetaminophen (e.g., Tylenol) or ibuprofen. Continue this until 24 hours have passed without pain.
3. **LOCAL HEAT:** Apply local heat for 20 minutes 4 times a day. Use a heating pad, warm washcloth or hot shower to the area.
4. **STRETCHING EXERCISES:** Gentle stretching exercises of the shoulders and chest wall in sets of 10 twice daily may prevent recurrence of muscle cramps. Stretching exercises can be continued even during active chest pain. Avoid any that increase the pain.
5. **EXPECTED COURSE:** For sore muscles, the pain usually peaks on day 2 and lasts 6 or 7 days.
6. **CALL YOUR DOCTOR IF:**
 - a. Pain becomes severe or worse
 - b. Pain lasts over 7 days on treatment



Treatment for Heartburn (Reflux) Pain

1. **REASSURANCE:**
 - a. Heartburn is common
 - b. It's due to stomach acid refluxed up into the esophagus
 - c. Causes a burning discomfort behind the lower sternum, a sour (acid) taste in the mouth and belching
2. **ANTACIDS:**
 - a. Heartburn is usually easily relieved by 1 to 2 tablespoons (15 - 30 ml) of liquid antacid by mouth.
 - b. If you don't have an antacid, wash out the esophagus with 2 to 3 ounces (60 - 90 ml) of milk.
 - c. For persistent heartburn, give antacid 1 hour before meals and at bedtime for a few days.
3. **HEARTBURN PREVENTION:**
 - a. Avoid overeating which overfills the stomach
 - b. Avoid foods that increase reflux (chocolate, fatty foods, spicy foods, carbonated soda, caffeine)
 - c. Avoid bending over during the 3 hours after meals
 - d. Avoid tight clothing or belts around the waist

When To Call

Call 911 Now (your child may need an ambulance) If

- [Severe difficulty breathing](#) (struggling for each breath, grunting to push air out, unable to speak or cry or lips are bluish)
- Not moving or too weak to stand

Call your doctor now (night or day) If

- Your child looks or acts very sick
- Your child has heart disease
- Difficulty breathing, but not severe
- Taking a deep breath makes pain worse
- Severe chest pain
- Heart beating very rapidly or has fainted
- Followed a direct blow to the chest
- Unexplained chest pain present (EXCEPTION: pain due to coughing, sore muscles, heartburn or other obvious cause)

Call your doctor within 24 hours (between 9 am and 4 pm) If

- You think your child needs to be seen
- Fever is present



Call your doctor during weekday office hours If

- You have other questions or concerns
- Chest pains only occur with vigorous exercise (eg, running)
- Sore muscles lasts over 7 days
- Heartburn persists over 2 days on treatment
- Chest pains are a recurrent chronic problem

Adapted from The American Academy of Pediatrics (2011) at www.healthychildren.org

