

Patient information from BMJ

Last published: Apr 15, 2025

Unstable angina: what are the treatment options?

Unstable angina is a medical emergency. It's a severe pain in your chest that happens if your heart is not getting enough oxygen. It can be a warning sign of a heart attack.

There are treatments for unstable angina, so if it happens it's important to go to the hospital right away.

This information is about treatments you may be given in hospital and when you go home. To learn more about the causes and symptoms of unstable angina, see our patient information *Unstable angina: what is it?*

Treatments for unstable angina

If you get treatment quickly for unstable angina you have a good chance of avoiding having a heart attack. In hospital you'll have emergency treatment to prevent it. This might include an operation to help improve blood flow to your heart.

When you go home you'll need to carry on taking medications to help prevent another attack of unstable angina, and lower your risk of a heart attack.

Emergency medications

To relieve your chest pain you'll probably be given **nitrates**. This type of medication relaxes the walls of your arteries so that your blood can flow more easily. You may be given a nitrate as a tablet that dissolves under your tongue, or as an IV drip.

Nitrates might give you some mild side effects, including headaches, feeling dizzy, and redness in the face.

The other medication you'll probably be given immediately is **aspirin**. Most people think of aspirin as a painkiller. But it also helps to stop blood cells sticking together to form clots. Taking aspirin helps stop the clot that caused your unstable angina from getting bigger. This can reduce your chances of having a heart attack.

Unstable angina: what are the treatment options?

You might also take medications called **beta-blockers**, which slow your heart down. This means that it needs less oxygen. The beta-blockers should reduce your chest pain. They might also reduce your chance of having a heart attack.

Beta-blockers come as pills or shots. You might have shots at first followed by tablets.

You may also be given a medication called an **anticoagulant**. This is another type of medication that helps prevent blood clots. Most of these medications are just used for a few days when you first have treatment. They are usually given as IV drips or as shots.

Some of these drugs increase your chances of serious bleeding, so you will be monitored closely.

Surgery

If medications are not enough to help control your angina, doctors might recommend you have a surgical procedure. **Coronary angiography** is a procedure that allows doctors to look at your coronary arteries and see how serious the blockage is. They may be able to do an operation at the same time that widens the arteries so blood can flow more easily to your heart. This is called **angioplasty**. Or you might hear it called **stenting**.

A surgeon feeds a thin, deflated balloon into your heart artery, through a tube in a blood vessel in your groin.

When the balloon is in the right place, the surgeon inflates it so that it widens the artery. Then it's taken out again. Sometimes a small metal tube (called a **stent**) is inserted, to keep the artery open.

All operations carry some risks. The main risk with angioplasty is excessive bleeding. So you will be carefully monitored.

Long-term treatments

After your unstable angina improves, your doctor will talk to you about how to stay healthy and stop your angina getting worse.

You will probably go home from the hospital with a lot of new medications. If you're unsure about any of them, ask your doctor. Below is a list of the medications you are most likely to need. You will probably need to take them for many months, and some of them for the rest of your life.

You will need to continue taking some of the medications you started in the hospital. This will probably include low-dose **aspirin** and **beta-blockers**. You will probably be given **nitrate** pills or a spray to take if you get angina pain again.

It is important to note if you are taking nitrates you must talk to your doctor before taking any medications for erectile dysfunction such as sildenafil (viagra). There are other medications that can affect how your nitrates work or make side effects worse if they are taken together. Examples include some antidepressants and some medications for migraines. Always tell your doctor about any other medications you are taking.

Unstable angina: what are the treatment options?

Your doctor might prescribe you other medications to lower your risk of having a heart attack. These could include:

- another **antiplatelet** medication as well as aspirin (or instead of aspirin if you are unable to take aspirin)
- **statins** to lower the amount of cholesterol in your blood
- **ACE inhibitors** to lower your blood pressure.

What happens next?

Medications are important in preventing heart problems. But for many people it's changes to their lifestyle that will make the biggest difference.

For example, it will be important to control your blood pressure. You should take any blood pressure medications prescribed by your doctor. If you have diabetes you will need to be extra careful about managing your blood sugar levels. Keeping your weight within a healthy range is also important.

If you smoke, talk to your doctor about ways to try and stop. Smoking narrows the arteries and makes you more likely to have a heart attack. There are treatments that can help you stop smoking. You can also read our patient information on *Stopping smoking*.

Eating healthily can help protect your heart whether you want to lose weight or not. A healthy diet should include at least five servings of fruit and vegetables every day, and not too much fat and sugar. Eating oily fish, such as salmon, once a week is also recommended.

Exercise helps keep your heart healthy, improves stamina and strength, and makes you feel good. Talk to your doctor about what kind of exercise you should do and how much is safe for you. If you have just started to exercise again you should think about building up your activity level gradually. You should also keep your angina medication close by so you can use it quickly if needed.

Treating depression can help reduce the risk of heart problems. If you often have a very low mood or think you might be depressed, talk to your doctor. There are treatments such as therapy and antidepressant medications that can help.

Limit how much alcohol you drink. Talk to your doctor about how much is OK.

The patient information from *BMJ Best Practice* is regularly updated. The most recent version of Best Practice can be found at bestpractice.bmj.com. This information is intended for use by health professionals. It is not a substitute for medical advice. It is strongly recommended that you independently verify any interpretation of this material and, if you have a medical problem, see your doctor.

Please see BMJ's full terms of use at: bmj.com/company/legal-information. BMJ does not make any representations, conditions, warranties or guarantees, whether express or implied, that this material is accurate, complete, up-to-date or fit for any particular purposes.

© BMJ Publishing Group Ltd 2025. All rights reserved.

Unstable angina: what are the treatment options?

What did you think about this patient information guide?

Complete the [online survey](#) or scan the QR code to help us to ensure our content is of the highest quality and relevant for patients. The survey is anonymous and will take around 5 minutes to complete.

