

Know the difference between a heart attack and **cardiac arrest**.

Characteristics	Heart Attack	Cardiac Arrest
Average Age	65 (men) : 72 (women) (less likely to occur in people younger than 35 years of age)	Mid-60s (occurs in all ages, although frequency increases with increasing age)
Male : Female Incidence Rate	2 : 1	3 : 2
Immediate Cause	Blockage or significant narrowing of a coronary artery, causing tissue damage to an area of heart muscle due to lack of oxygen	Cessation of mechanical activity of the heart, caused by a malfunction in the heart's electrical system
Early warning symptoms	Patients may experience chest pain or upper body discomfort, unusual fatigue, weakness, nausea, shortness of breath; symptoms may occur days or weeks before.	Some patients may experience palpitations, dizziness, chest pain or shortness of breath momentarily before loss of consciousness and collapse.
Loss of pulse, blood pressure, consciousness	Heart attack may lead to cardiac arrest	Yes—in all cases
Breathing?	Yes	No, although gasping and agonal breaths may be mistaken for normal breathing.
Cardiac Rhythm	May be accompanied by arrhythmias that do not cause loss of mechanical heart beats	Characterized by complete lack of a heart rhythm or one incapable of generating a mechanical heart beat
Risk Factors/ Medical History	Coronary artery disease, congenital abnormalities in vasculature of the myocardium	Cardiac risk factors include coronary artery disease, cardiomyopathy, myocardial infarction, valvular heart disease, congenital heart disease, and genetic syndromes. Non-cardiac causes include electrolyte imbalance, severe blood loss, drug use, and drowning
Treatment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medication to dissolve blood clot, dilate coronary blood vessels, and provide chest pain relief • Coronary angioplasty and stent to open blocked artery • Post-infarction care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CPR • Defibrillation • ACLS • Post-arrest care

NOTES: ACLS = advanced cardiac life support; CPR = cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

SOURCE: *Strategies to Improve Cardiac Arrest Survival: A Time to Act* (Institute of Medicine, 2015).