What you need to know about cardiogenic shock

By John Finley, PA-C

Q. What is cardiogenic shock, and why should I care?

A. Cardiogenic shock occurs when your heart cannot pump enough oxygen-rich blood to your body because the heart muscles are damaged or weakened, typically by a heart attack. While less well-known than other heart conditions, cardiogenic shock develops quickly, and its symptoms are easy to miss. According to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, although only 7 percent of heart attack patients develop cardiogenic shock, it is the most common cause of death in heart attacks.

Know the signs. Although some heart attacks are sudden and intense, most start slowly with mild pain or discomfort and shortness of breath. While cardiogenic shock can develop after a heart attack, other caused by heart conditions can cause the cardiogenic shock, so it is important to know all the signs and symptoms:

- Confusion or lack of alertness
- Sudden and sustained rapid heartbeat
- Sweating
- Pale skin
- Cold hands or feet

Seek emergency treatment. It’s surprising that many heart attack victims wait hours or even days to seek help. If you think you are having a heart attack, call 911 so that medical personnel can provide lifesaving treatment on the way to the hospital, do not drive yourself there. Emergency treatment can immediately improve the flow of blood and oxygen to your body’s organs. When your body loses oxygen, cells in your brain, liver and other vital organs begin to die, which will result in both damage and loss of function.

Manage your heart health. A history of heart attack or heart disease, old age, high blood pressure, or diabetes can all increase your risk of cardiogenic shock. The best way to prevent cardiogenic shock is to lower your risk of heart disease with your heart conditions by making a few simple lifestyle changes:

- Avoid secondhand smoke, and, if you are a smoker, quit.
- Maintain a healthy weight. By losing just 10 pounds, you can lower your risk of high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease and diabetes, all of which contribute to heart attacks and cardiogenic shock.
- Avoid foods high in cholesterol and saturated fat, and limit your intake of sugar and alcohol.
- Engage in cardiovascular activities, such as walking, jogging, swimming or cycling, for at least 30 minutes every day.
- Talk to your doctor about your risk factors for heart disease and managing your heart health.

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