

Information for patients with benign (non-cardiac) chest pain

The results of your tests:

The blood tests we have taken today have shown no evidence of damage to your heart.

Your exercise treadmill test was normal.

If you have any further questions relating to these results telephone **0114 2715969**,

9.00am to 5.00pm,

Monday to Friday, to speak to one of the chest pain nurses.

Alternatively telephone the hospital switchboard, on 0114 243 4343 and ask them to bleep the chest pain nurses on bleep 807.

What is benign chest pain?

Many people with chest pain who have tests are found to have normal hearts and no heart disease.

The results of your tests show that you do not have heart disease. This means that your chest pain is not caused by heart disease.

What causes benign chest pain?

There are several causes of benign chest pain.

These include:

- i Pain in the muscles between the ribs caused by tension in these muscles.
- i Pain in the chest wall caused by strains or tears in the muscles or ligaments.
- i Breathing incorrectly, such as breathing too fast, or over-using the chest muscles to breathe.
- i Spasm, tightening or inflammation of the oesophagus (the food pipe from the throat to the stomach).
- i Pain coming from pinched nerves in the neck or back.

What does this mean?

These are all real physical causes of chest pain, but none of them are medically serious. This means that you can start to return to living a normal life, without letting your chest pain limit what you do.

All of the physical causes listed above can be made worse by *avoiding activity, by concern and worry, and by excessive focusing on the pain.*

- **Avoiding activities** such as work, hobbies, or exercise, can worsen pain, rather than making it better. Sometimes people avoid these activities because they think that activity will either bring on their symptoms or make their pain worse. In fact, avoiding activities means that chest pain becomes more likely in the long run. It also means that the chance of getting heart problems in the future is increased. Physical activity can keep you healthy and most people feel generally better when they are fit. Living a full life will help to keep your heart healthy.
- **Concern and worry** can lead to increases in muscle tension, which in turn causes more pain in the chest, which in turn can lead to more worry. A vicious circle of worry and chest pain can therefore be set up.
- **Excessive focusing on the body** means paying great attention to sensations such as pain or discomfort coming from the chest. This can worsen any discomfort that is present.

What can I do about the chest pain?

If you have benign chest pain there are several things you can do that can really make a difference, and help you to return to a normal life.

Four useful steps include:

- ï Increasing your activities and exercise
- ï Controlling your breathing
- ï Relaxing
- ï Dealing with worrying thoughts.

Some tips on what to do are detailed over the page. Do not expect an instant improvement, because practice and persistence are important. Generally, improvement occurs in fits and starts over a period of time.

What can I do now?

- **Increase your activity levels and take more physical exercise.**

Having chest pain may mean that you have been taking less exercise and avoiding doing certain things.

Remember, because you do not have heart disease, you can exercise when you get pain and **exercise cannot harm you**. In fact, exercise will help to keep your heart healthy and most people feel generally better when they are fitter. It is important to exercise and increase your physical activity otherwise there is a risk you will become less physically fit and your muscles will get smaller, less powerful and hurt more when you exercise.

It will help if you make a list of the activities you have been avoiding. Select one activity to start with. This might be the easiest to get back to, or the one that you really want to get back to. With this one activity, gradually increase your level of activity over a period of time. Then, choose another activity that you have been avoiding, and steadily return to that. Gradually reduce the list of things that you have been avoiding because of the chest pain.

Aim to return to a full and active life. There is no reason why you cannot.

For further help you may want to look at:

www.sheffield.nhs.uk/health *or* www.sheffieldhelpyourself.org.uk

- **Controlling your breathing**

Many people breathe too fast or too deeply. This can cause chest muscles to ache and become tense and painful. Try to breathe **slowly**, through your **nose**, allowing your **stomach** and not your upper chest wall to swell, at a rhythm of 8 to 12 breaths per minute.

To control your breathing place one hand on your chest and one hand on your stomach. Normally the hand on your chest hardly moves when you breath but the one on your stomach will. Concentrate on this pattern of breathing and attempt to slow your breathing gradually.

- **Relaxation**

Relaxation will help you to reduce muscle tension which can cause chest pain. Practise (using a relaxation tape if possible) for 30 minutes once or twice a day for the first few weeks. Decide on a time of day, choose somewhere quiet and comfortable, and record your progress in a diary.

For more advice on how to relax and manage stress, read 'Manage Your Mind' (Butler, G & Hope, T: Oxford University Press).

Alternatively, on the web, have a look at:

www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

or

www.sheffield.nhs.uk/health

for local information.

• Dealing with worrying thoughts

Chest pain is often accompanied by worrying or alarming thoughts, such as "this could be a heart attack" or "I might die". Understandably, these thoughts can increase anxiety. Increased anxiety can make your pain worse.

There are several ways to deal with worrying thoughts. These include:

- i Distraction by physical or mental activity, such as going for a short walk, or reading a good book, or meeting friends.
- ii Refocusing your attention, away from your pain, by, for example, counting the number of red objects you can see.
- iii Managing your worrying thoughts. If you have thoughts such as ***"there is something seriously wrong causing this pain"***, or ***"it's my heart"***, write them down in a Thought Diary.

Then, try to replace the worrying thought with an alternative thought such as, ***"I know there is nothing wrong with my heart because the nurse has done all the tests and my heart is normal. The chest pain is caused by tension in my chest muscles"***.

When you are out and about, you can use this positive self-talk to manage your thoughts and to manage your chest pain.

What else can I do?

- i **If you smoke – stop!** This is the most important thing that any smoker can do to improve their health. By giving up smoking you can reduce the risk of developing many smoking related illnesses.

For practical advice on stopping, contact your GP, contact the NHS Smoking Helpline on **0800 169 0169**, or have a look at their website at www.givingupsmoking.co.uk.

- ii **Reduce stress.** Identify situations that make you feel stressed at home or at work. Avoid them if you can or work out ways of dealing with them.

Use a stress-reducing technique that suits you, such as yoga, relaxation tapes, or physical exercise. 'Manage Your Mind' (Butler, G & Hope, T; Oxford University Press) is an excellent book that can help you to manage the stresses in your life.

If you prefer the web, have a look at:

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or

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for local information.