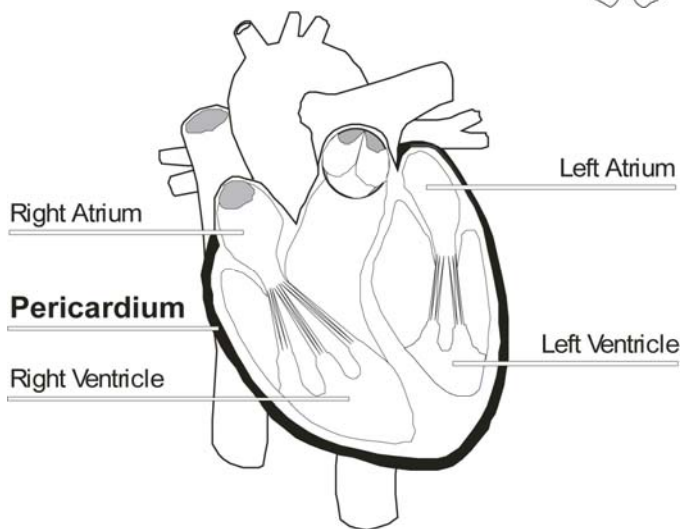
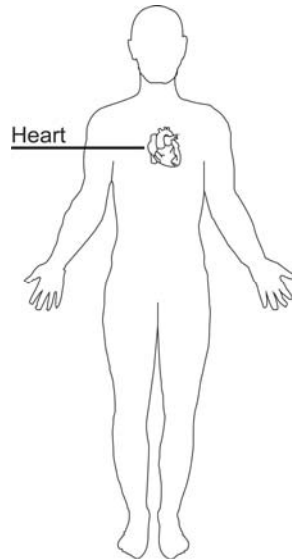


Pericarditis

What is pericarditis?

Your heart sits in a very thin sac called the pericardium (sounds like pear-eh-card-ee-um). The heart sac is filled with a small amount of fluid that prevents the sac from sticking or rubbing against your heart.

The heavy black line in the picture below is the heart sac or pericardium.



Looking at a side view of the heart

Pericarditis (sounds like pear-eh-card-eye-tis) is a condition where the heart sac becomes swollen or inflamed. Any swelling or extra fluid in the heart sac can restrict the heart's ability to pump as it normally should.

What causes pericarditis?

Viruses and bacteria can cause pericarditis but often we do not know the cause. However, there is a greater chance of getting pericarditis if:

- You have a weakened immune system and cannot fight off infections and other diseases.
- You have had a heart attack.
- You have had an injury or surgery to your chest or heart.

What are the signs of pericarditis?

It is common to have pain on the left side or in the centre of the chest. Sometimes, the pain can be felt in the neck and left shoulder. The pain can feel dull, sharp, or aching. It can get worse when you cough, swallow, take a deep breath, lie down, or roll over in bed.

Along with pain, you might also:

- Feel short of breath
- Feel very tired
- Have a cough
- Have a fever along with chills
- Feel sick to your stomach

How we tell you have pericarditis

This condition is often found when we listen to your heart and lungs with a stethoscope. A sign of pericarditis is an abnormal 'grating' or 'rubbing' sound coming from your inflamed heart sac. The rubbing sound can get even louder when you lean forward. We might also hear a crackling sound in your lungs.

Pericarditis - *continued*

You might have these tests:

- **Chest x-ray** – This shows us the size of your heart. If it is bigger than it should be, there could be a build-up of fluid in the heart sac.
- **Electrocardiograph (ECG or EKG)** – This test checks your heart's rhythm and tells us if there is any extra strain being put on your heart.
- **Echocardiogram** – This test uses ultrasound waves to show us how your heart is working. It also should if there is fluid in your heart sac.
- **Blood tests** – Several routine blood tests are done.

How we treat pericarditis

We treat pericarditis with rest and medicines. Medicines are for pain and to reduce the swelling in the heart sac (usually an 'anti-inflammatory' medicine).

With treatment, pericarditis usually goes away within a few weeks or months. Until the pain, discomfort, and fever (if you have one) are gone, the best thing you can do is to rest and take your medicine as directed.

If there is a lot of fluid in the heart sac, it can cause severe pressure on your heart and make it hard for your heart to pump blood as it normally should. The fluid must be removed. To do this, the doctor will 'freeze' an area on your chest with freezing medicine called a local anesthetic (sounds like ann-eh-s-theh-tic). Then the doctor puts a needle through your chest wall into the heart sac and pulls out the extra fluid. The fluid is sent for testing.

How can pericarditis be prevented?

There is no known way to prevent pericarditis.

When to get help

Call 9-1-1 right away if you notice any of the following:

- You have severe chest pain that does not go away with changing position or pain medicine.
- You have severe pain in your left shoulder or neck.
- You find it hard to breathe, even when resting.

Call your family doctor if you notice any of the following:

- You have a fever over 38.5°C (101.3°F), that does not go away with plain acetaminophen (such as Regular Tylenol) or ibuprofen (such as Advil, Motrin).
- You feel like your heart is skipping a beat or beating too fast.
- You cannot stop coughing.
- You find it hard to swallow.
- You have swelling in your ankles, feet, or legs.

To learn more, it's good to ask:

- Your family doctor
- HealthLinkBC - call 8-1-1 (7-1-1 for deaf and hard of hearing) or go online at www.HealthLinkBC.ca