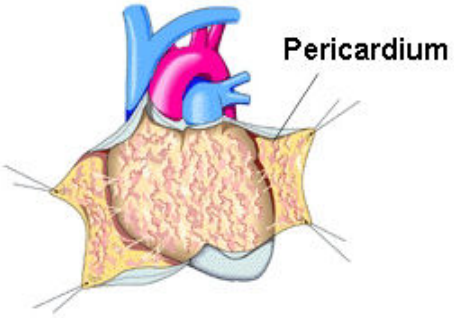
Pericarditis

Pericarditis is an *inflammation* (soreness or redness) of the *sac* (almost like a bag) surrounding the heart, starting at the large vessels at the top of the heart, shown in the picture, and wrapping down around the heart. The inside of this sac is very smooth so the heart can beat and slide easily within this protective membrane. The outside of the sac is a tougher layer of material. This sac may become inflamed by a number of different problems. Pericarditis is usually accompanied by pain in the chest which radiates to the shoulder, back, and upper and middle belly (*abdomen*). There may be shortness of breath and swelling of the abdomen. Sometimes fluid collects around the heart. When this happens the heart cannot beat as well. When your heart is unable to work as well, you will not feel well. You have may have shortness of breath (*dyspnea*) with exertion such as climbing stairs. The kidneys do not work as well so you may retain fluid. This is also one of the reasons your lower legs and ankles swell.



The first sign you will usually recognize is chest pain. You will also usually get a rapid heartbeat. You may have sudden unexplained weight gain of ten to fifteen pounds. You may get short of breath while sleeping. The heart actually has to work harder while you are lying down. This may also produce a night cough. It may help to sleep with two or more pillows.

With treatment these symptoms usually improve rapidly. Upon discharge from this location, weigh yourself after arriving home. Record your weight daily at the same time. This will give some indication as to your progress. As you get better your weight will usually go down. Follow a low sodium diet.

CAUSES

- Medicine side effects
- Radiation as received for treatment of cancer
- Tumors or cancer themselves
- Infections. These may be caused by viruses, germs (*bacteria*) or fungi
- Tuberculosis (this is also an infection)
- Autoimmune disorders such as lupus, scleroderma, and rheumatoid arthritis

DIAGNOSIS

The diagnosis of pericarditis is made by *history* (asking the patient what seems to be the problem) and physical exam (looking and listening to the patient by the caregiver). Blood tests may need to be done. Often specialized tests such as *echocardiogram* (pictures which are taken by bouncing sound waves off the heart), CT scans of the heart and chest, and perhaps other tests depending on what is happening, may be done.

TREATMENT

- Treatment of pericarditis will usually include medicine to relieve pain.
- If water retention is present, water reducing pills (*diuretics*) may be given to get rid of the water accumulation.
- If the pericarditis is caused by an infection which can be treated, medicine which kill germs (*antibiotics*) will be started. If the infection is caused by a fungus or tuberculosis, treatment may be necessary for very long times.
- If the infection is caused by a virus it will usually run its course and cause no further problems. When a virus is the cause, *anti-inflammatory medicines* (medicine against soreness) will often be given.
- If complications occur from pericarditis, such as scarring of the pericardial sac following the inflammation, surgery is rarely needed to remove the sac. The sac surrounding the heart is not necessary for life. When it becomes scarred, it makes it more difficult for the heart to beat normally.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Follow the treatment plan your caregiver prescribes. They can help you with your post hospital care program. Follow your caregiver's advice regarding dieting and exercise. Eat a low fat diet. Use alcohol **only as directed**. Take all medicines as directed.
- Eat a nutritious diet low in fat and sodium.
- Try to maintain an ideal weight. Your caregivers can help you with this.
- Exercise as instructed.
- Wear a medical alert bracelet if recommended by your caregiver.
- Keep medicine with you, including a list with dosages, in case of an emergency.
- **Stop smoking.**

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- Chest pain.
- Vomiting.
- Sweating (*diaphoresis*).
- Irregular heart beat (*palpitations*).
- Racing heart.
- Fainting episodes.
- Feeling sick to your stomach (*nausea*).
- Weakness.

If you develop any of the *symptoms* (complaints, problems) which originally brought you into the clinic, hospital, or emergency department, call for local emergency medical help. Do not drive yourself to the hospital.

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