What Does Anxiety Chest Pain Feel Like?

by ANNA JACKSON

Anxiety and Chest Pain

I speak from personal experience when I say that chest pains during an anxiety attack are possibly one of the most uncomfortable symptoms to go through. I still experience them from time-to-time but not too long ago I had them frequently, so I can understand the stress that they cause.

When I am particularly anxious, I tend to tense up without even realizing it, and this often presents itself quite aggressively around my chest. I experience tightness and tension in the center of my chest that gradually intensifies and spreads out over my upper chest and shoulders.

What Does Anxiety Chest Pain Feel Like?

Chest pains from anxiety can vary from person to person — some may experience an aching or throbbing pain, and others can feel sharp stabbing or shooting pains. These symptoms can often last up to ten minutes and tend to develop quickly and fade quite rapidly.

Before we go any further, it is important to know that although chest pains are a common symptom of anxiety, they can also be due to an underlying health issue.

If you experience any type of chest pain or discomfort, seek medical advice before immediately putting it down to anxiety.

Symptoms include:

- A persistent ache in the chest area.
- Sharp shooting pains.
- Muscle spasms or muscle twitching.
- Tightness.
- Throbbing pressure.

Anxiety and Chest Tightness

When we experience tightness in our chest, it is usually a result of the way we breathe both before and during an anxiety attack. However, tightness in the chest can also affect those with milder anxiety.

When we are in distress, our body attempts to protect us against potential harm and therefore causes our muscles to tighten and contract. Chest tightness can be felt in one place, many places, all over the chest area or can radiate anywhere from your head down to your abdomen. Although chest tightness caused by anxiety is harmless, it can cause significant discomfort.

The best way to relieve this tightness is to try and calm yourself. Practicing relaxation techniques, avoiding coffee and alcohol, as well as exercising regularly can help to prevent symptoms.

Anxiety Chest Pain vs. Heart Attack

When experiencing chest pain with anxiety, it can be easy to confuse the symptoms with those associated with a heart attack as the symptoms of both can be similar but there are some differences to look out for.

Heart attacks cause more of a crushing/squeezing sensation, and the pain tends to spread from the chest to the shoulders, neck, and jaw.

Anxiety chest pains are usually sharper than the pain caused by a heart attack and tend to happen when a person is at rest, rather than a heart attack, which often occurs when a person is active.

Heart attack Symptoms:

- Escalating heart rate.
- Upper body pain.
- Fainting.
- Dizziness.
- Stomach pain.
- Sweating.
- Shortness of breath.
- Pain brought on by exertion.
- Constant pain or pressure in the chest.

Anxiety and chest pain symptoms:

- Chest tightness or pain.
- Dizziness.
- Sweating.
- Pain relieved or worsened by changing position.

This is not an exhaustive list of symptoms but a collection of the most common in these cases. In any case, as stated earlier in this article, if you do suspect you may be having a heart attack, seek medical attention immediately.

Breathing Exercises to Help Relieve Anxiety Chest Pain

As hyperventilation causes most anxiety chest pains, but you can help alleviate these chest pains by controlling your breathing.

Either standing up or sitting down (whichever is most comfortable for you). Relax your arms loosely at your sides and breathe deeply into your belly as is comfortable without forcing it. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to keep your breaths gentle and as regular as you can. Some people find it helpful to count along with their breaths between three and five seconds during each breath, in and out.

For example:

- Breathe in through your nose, then count: 1, 2, 4, 5.
- Breathe out through your mouth, then count: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.

Below I have included some relaxation breathing techniques that may help to relieve your chest pains.

Natural Breathing

- Gently and slowly inhale a normal amount of air through your nose, filling only your lower lungs. (Your stomach will expand while your upper chest remains still.)
- Exhale easily.
- Continue this gentle breathing pattern with a relaxed attitude, concentrating on filling only the lower lungs.

Calming Breath

- Take a long, slow breath in through your nose, first filling your lower lungs, then your upper lungs.
- Hold your breath to the count of three.
- Exhale slowly through pursed lips while you relax the muscles in your face, jaw, shoulders and stomach.

Calming Counts

- Sit comfortably.
- Take a long, deep breath and exhale it slowly while saying the word "relax" silently.
- Close your eyes.
- Let yourself take 10 natural, relaxed breaths. Countdown with each exhale, starting with 10.
- This time, while you are breathing comfortably, notice any tensions, perhaps in your jaw or forehead or stomach. Imagine those tensions loosening.
- When you reach one, open your eyes again.

Others Ways to Relieve Anxiety and Chest Pain

- Remove yourself from stressful environments.
- Meditate.
- Talk to someone about your anxiety.
- Get a soothing massage to ease tension.
- Identify which thoughts cause you stress.
- Physical exercise.
- Listen to calming music.
- Relaxation books, tapes or apps.

Another technique often used if to imagine a beautiful or peaceful scene. Practicing breathing techniques while imagining such a scene can help reduce your stress and also gives your mind something positive to focus on.

Personally, I tend to remove anything that is physically causing me to feel uncomfortable – like tight clothing. I have also found a change of position to be beneficial. For example, if you are seated or lying in a position that causes your body to be curled into itself, try standing or sitting up so you can breathe more easily and expand your chest to ease tension.

If you find yourself in an environment that is causing you even the slightest bit of stress, remove yourself from it. The longer we stay in an environment that makes us uncomfortable, the more frequently we will experience such symptoms.

If for any reason you cannot easily remove yourself from such an environment, try talking to those around you. Explain your situation and consider ways in which you can make things less stressful and more comfortable.

The Takeaway

It’s important to remember that the symptoms of anxiety chest pain are only temporary, and while it is appreciated that the symptoms are worrying and uncomfortable, they will eventually fade.

Some people have found that repeating a mantra has been beneficial during an anxiety attack and have also applied that same technique when experiencing chest pains. For example:

- “This is only temporary.”
- “Every breath I inhale calms me, and every breath I exhale removes tension.”
- “This too shall pass.”
- “I will calm my mind and overcome this feeling.”

I highly recommend practicing some or all of the techniques above to see which works for you.

As we know, anxiety and chest pain can come on very quickly, and it is always better to be prepared so that we have a course of action when they present themselves.

Please remember, if at any time you do suspect you may be experiencing a heart attack, call the emergency services immediately, as it is always better to be safe and sure.