



What to do if an elephant sits on your chest

By Ralph Monteagudo, DO, Lincoln Hospital & North Basin Medical Clinics



The scenario: You wake up in the morning with a bad pain or heavy pressure in your chest. What do you do?

Current wisdom says you try taking an antacid, sit up and if it goes away in a minute or two, get checked out by your physician later. But this pain is *bad*, it does not go away. It's lasting more than 10-15 minutes. You're having some difficulty breathing and maybe even begin to sweat. Finally, there is pain in your left arm and/or your jaw, and possibly even your back.

Could this be a heart attack?

Highly possible, but we don't know until you seek medical attention. Getting to the nearest ER is critical.

Once you're in the ER, not only do we have equipment such as a cutting edge Bi-Phasic defibrillator on hand if we need it, we can place you on oxygen, check your vital signs, give you aspirin (assuming no allergy), and obtain a diagnostic EKG. As time is of the essence, our goal is to have all this done within 10 minutes of your arrival at Lincoln Hospital.

Now, an EKG is an electrical tracing of the heart. It shows us if there is a blockage of electrical flow in the heart muscle. Once the signs of a heart blockage are seen on the EKG, immediate transfer to a waiting cardiologist and a catheterization team needs to be coordinated. Our goal? To minimize damage to the heart muscle by getting chronic cardiac patients from the Lincoln Hospital ER to cardiac specialists in Spokane within 90 minutes of their arrival here. Impossible? We used to think so.

Thanks to a new partnership between Sacred Heart Medical Center and Lincoln Hospital, the **Level One Cardiac Care** program is in place to do just that -- bring state of the art treatment to rural patients through a coordinated effort between your primary care physician and the SHMC cardiology catheterization lab.

Sacred Heart has committed to Lincoln Hospital that when we call with a patient in need of further care, their catheterization lab team will be quickly assembled, prep the lab and be waiting for immediate treatment. No waiting. No paperwork. No red tape. You have a reservation -- one that could save your life.

Now, what if that EKG does not show a possible blockage? Not all chest pain is a critical heart attack in need of immediate transfer to a cath lab. Here are some other possibilities -- all serious and all needing immediate medical attention at the first sign of symptoms...

- Angina -- a condition where your heart doesn't receive enough blood. You may respond to nitroglycerin and other heart medicines, and there is no permanent damage. Get an appointment for further treatment after visiting the ER.
- Acute Coronary Syndrome -- You may respond to heart medicine, but symptoms continue regardless of the treatment. It's then important to seek care so your physician can begin trying other medications and arranging for a heart evaluation by a cardiologist.

So to summarize, if you feel a significant chest pain or pressure that does not go away soon, go to the **Lincoln Hospital Emergency Room FIRST**. If you can't drive (maybe you shouldn't) call an ambulance. The time you save by going to the nearest ER and not driving all the way to Spokane will get the necessary diagnostics and treatment started at least 30 minutes sooner. Not to say if something happened en route - your heart stops in your car -- there is no one to help.

Bottom line -- early arrival at the Lincoln Hospital ER, quick assessment and, if necessary, coordination with the Cardiac Team is the highest standard of care for rural patients. The cardiac specialists at Sacred Heart say Lincoln Hospital first, and so do we!

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