

What to Expect After Cardiac Arrest

Cardiac Arrest

Cardiac arrest occurs when the heart stops beating all of a sudden. It can be caused by an irregular, weak heart beat (arrhythmia). Sometimes the cause is unknown. When the heart is not working, blood is not being pumped. Blood carries oxygen to the tissues and organs of the body. If any part of the body goes without oxygen for a long time, it can be damaged or die.

When a cardiac arrest occurs, it is vital to restore blood flow to the body. We must restart the heart. The patient will need CPR and defibrillation (shocking the heart) to occur quickly. If these are done soon enough, damage to the body and brain can be prevented or reduced.

Cardiac arrest is not the same as a heart attack. A heart attack is caused by a blockage in one of the arteries of the heart. This can damage the heart muscle and lead to cardiac arrest. Cardiac arrest can also occur without having a heart attack.

What to Expect in the Hospital

After cardiac arrest, the patient may be taken to the emergency department (ED). From there, the patient will be taken to an intensive care unit (ICU). There will be a lot going on in the ICU. We will use different types of equipment and medicines to help support blood pressure, heart rate and oxygen levels.

We often treat these patients with a ventilator (breathing machine) and hypothermia. Hypothermia means the body's temperature is below normal. We use this treatment to help reduce damage to the brain and other organs. Adults who do not wake up after their heart is beating again may cooled to 33° to 36° C (91.4-96.8° F). Normal body temperature is 37.0° C (98.6° F).

Patients can be cooled from the inside or outside. We use a thin plastic tube (catheter) to cool on the inside. We will place it into a large vein in the groin. Cold water in the catheter cools the patient quickly. The water stays inside of the catheter. We use ice packs and cooling blankets to cool on the outside.

We will give the patient medicine for pain and to help stay calm and sleepy. People shiver when their body temperature drops. This is a natural reflex to try to warm the body. We may give the patient medicine to prevent shivering and movement.

We will watch the patient closely and check vital signs often. We will keep track of body temperature with a probe. This probe will be placed in the bladder or rectum.

We will keep the body temperature low for about 24 hours. We may do other tests during this time. We will draw blood for testing. We will give medicines as needed.

The Re-Warming Process

After the cooling period is over, the body temperature is slowly raised. During this time, the equipment and medicines are removed when no longer needed. The nurses will closely watch the patient's vital signs and condition. It takes about 8 hours to re-warm the body.

When patients wake up, they often do not remember what happened the day of the cardiac arrest or even being in the hospital. The patient may be confused and have problems remembering some things.

The doctors will discuss further treatments with you and your family. Ask questions when you have them. The doctors will work with you to figure out the best plan of care for the patient. Each patient has different needs after a cardiac arrest.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 12/2019 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#6583.