

The different causes of chest pain

Chest pain is common among Asians, but its causes are different. It can be described broadly under two headings: 1) Cardiac chest pain (CCP) which is caused by heart diseases, and 2) non-cardiac chest pain (NCCP).

NCCP accounts for about 40 per cent of all chest pain occurrences. The symptoms felt from CCP and NCCP are similar and are difficult to differentiate.

NCCP may be due to a disease called GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease) which causes digestive juices, or acids, to rise up the esophagus from the stomach producing a burning feeling in the chest or throat, commonly known as heartburn or acid indigestion. NCCP happens more often in people with GERD than in people without GERD. In Hong Kong, 51 per cent of NCCP cases are due to GERD.

The Department of Medicine, The University of Hong Kong Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine, has conducted a study on chest pains suffered by patients with heart disease (CCP) and those with no heart disease (NCCP). The results showed that the pain felt by these two types of sufferers is very similar. Furthermore, NCCP sufferers with GERD displayed a higher degree of anxiety and stayed away from work more often compared with those without GERD.

Chest pain caused by GERD is seldom relieved by just modifying one's lifestyle. Sufferers need regular medication to control its occurrence. Among the available medications, recent studies carried out in Asia show that a kind of drug called "proton pump inhibitors" produce the most effective results. The drug reduces chest pain or its occurrence by inhibiting the production of acid in the stomach.