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. The heart must be restarted. Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and shocking the heart (defibrillation) need 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 also called a myocardial infarction (MI). A heart attack is caused by a blockage in one of the arteries of the heart. This can damage the heart muscle. It can lead to cardiac arrest. Cardiac arrest can 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 of activity going on in the ICU. Different types of equipment and medicines will be used to help support blood pressure, heart rate and oxygen levels.

Patients are often treated with a ventilator (breathing machine) and hypothermia. Hypothermia means the body’s temperature is below normal. This treatment is used to help reduce damage to the brain and other organs. Adults who do not wake up after their heart is beating on its own again are cooled to about 33° C (89.6-93.2° F). Normal body temperature is 37.0° C (98.6° F).

Patients can be cooled from the inside or outside. Cooling on the inside is done with a thin plastic tube called a catheter. It is placed into a large vein in the groin. Cold water in this cools the patient quickly. The water stays on the inside of the catheter. It does not go into the patient’s vein. Cooling on the outside is done with ice packs and cooling blankets.

The patient will be given medicine for pain and to stay calm and sleepy. The patient may also be given medicine that prevents movement and shivering. People shiver when their body temperature drops. This is a natural reflex to try to warm the body. Since the goal is to keep body temperature low, medicine may be given to prevent shivering.

The patient will be closely monitored. The nurses will check the vital signs often. They will keep track of body temperature with a probe. This probe will be placed in the bladder or rectum. The body temperature will be kept low for about 24 hours. Other tests may be done during the cooling procedure. Blood will be drawn for testing. Medicines will be given as needed.
The Re-Warming Process
After the cooling period is over, the body temperature is slowly raised. During re-warming, the equipment and medicines are removed when no longer needed. The nurses will closely monitor the patient’s vital signs and overall condition. It usually takes about 8 hours for the re-warming process to be completed.

If 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. It is important that you ask questions when you have them. The doctors will work with you to determine the best plan of care during the hospital stay and after. 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 © 10/2016 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#6583.