

Super Bowl could be hazardous to some fans' health

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It's fourth and long with 10 seconds on the clock. The anxiety builds. Epinephrine floods the bloodstream. Blood vessels constrict as the ball is snapped, causing a spike in blood pressure.

No one said being a fan was easy, especially during the Super Bowl. But a University of Florida emergency medicine expert says for some fans the excitement and anxiety of the biggest game of the year can simply be too much.

The body's physiological response to stress can exacerbate symptoms of heart disease and other conditions that fans may not even know they have, leading to an increased risk of heart attack or stroke, said Dr. David Seaberg, a professor and chairman of emergency medicine at UF's College of Medicine.

The body responds to the stress of watching a big game the same way it responds to a roller coaster ride or even bungee jumping, Seaberg said. The only difference? Roller coaster rides don't last three or four hours.

"A football game that lasts several hours may cause several physiological responses to occur, versus a short-lived activity like bungee jumping," Seaberg said. "A person with heart disease (for example) shouldn't get so excited it causes stress on their heart. People who have had strokes or high blood pressure have to be careful."

Swiss researchers found there were 60 percent more fatal heart attacks

after the World Cup than there were during a year when the soccer tournament was not played. In the United States, fan heart attacks have even made the news. Last year, a Pittsburgh Steelers fan suffered a heart attack after watching his favorite player, Jerome Bettis, fumble in the fourth quarter of a playoff game. In the emergency room at the Shands at UF medical center, doctors also tend to see more patients after big UF basketball or football games, such as the recent BCS National Championship game, Seaberg said.

Adding alcohol and salty or fatty foods to the mix also could be a recipe for an emergency room visit, he said. People who know they have pre-existing conditions shouldn't abandon their healthy habits on game day.

It's important that fans with heart disease, diabetes and other conditions remember to take their medicine and stick to wholesome snacks instead of gorging on nachos, beer or greasy chicken wings, Seaberg said.

Seaberg also warns fans not to ignore symptoms because they don't want to stop watching the game. A recent study at the University of Maryland found that men tend to forego trips to the emergency room during televised sporting events. Researchers found there was a lull in men's emergency room trips during games and a spike afterward.

"That tells us that even though they may be having problems they wait 'til the end of the game, which isn't very healthy," Seaberg said. "If you're having chest pain, abdominal pain, stroke symptoms or light-headedness you need to get the emergency department as soon as you can."

The study found that ER visits dropped during regular season games, but for high-stakes games like the Super Bowl, the chances are even greater that some fans will put off seeking treatment, said Dr. David Jerrard, a University of Maryland associate professor of emergency medicine who

conducted the research. This is particularly worrisome for people who have conditions such as heart disease, which could be exacerbated by the anxiety of watching the game, he said.

“I think a lot of people, their lives come to a standstill,” Jerrard said. “(But) if anything comes up, they shouldn’t wait until halftime. Don’t ignore it.”

But no matter whether you’re pulling for Peyton Manning, rooting for Da Bears or not watching the game at all, everyone should take precautions on game night, particularly on the roads. Often there are more accidents after games — traffic and otherwise — and they’re usually related to alcohol, Seaberg said. That’s why it’s important for anyone who chooses to drink at a Super Bowl party to find a designated driver.

“Just remember this is only a game,” Seaberg said. “This is not a life-or-death event and we don’t want it to be a life-or-death event in the emergency department. So eat smart. Make sure you take your medications and enjoy the game. But don’t get too stressed out over it.”

Source: University of Florida

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