

Doctors Warn Against Holiday Heart Attack Spike

December 3 2009

(PhysOrg.com) -- Some studies indicate that death rates from heart attacks and stroke as well as non-heart-related causes spike during the holiday season.

“It is not uncommon to see a heavier congestion in the hospital during the Christmas and New Year’s period of time. Some years that’s very true, but some years it’s quiet,” said cardiologist Keith Churchwell, M.D., chief medical officer and executive director of the Vanderbilt Heart and Vascular Institute.

A national database with detailed information on the 53 million deaths that occurred in the United States between 1973 and 2001 shows that deaths from heart disease peak in December/January, with spikes on Christmas and New Year's Day, according to a University of California at San Diego study.

Churchwell said there are several possible reasons for the spike. People who are having symptoms of heart trouble prior to the holiday season tend to delay going to the doctor or view the holidays as a reason to take a break from their exercise and diet programs, he said.

Also, it is not uncommon for people to drink more alcohol at the holidays, which can contribute to what is known as “holiday [heart syndrome](#).”

“Alcohol has a toxic effect on the heart muscle in a number of different ways, but in particular it can lead to an irritation of the heart muscle,

particularly the top chamber of the heart - the atrium,” Churchwell said. “This can lead to atrial fibrillation - an [abnormal heart rhythm](#) that is a classic finding of holiday heart.”

And with the hectic nature of the [holiday season](#), it’s easy to miss medication doses, which can lead to acute coronary trouble. Churchwell emphasizes the importance of remembering to take medications with you, such as [high blood pressure](#) pills and [blood thinners](#), if you travel out of town for the holidays.

He said his cardiology practice sees an increase in phone calls from patients immediately after the holidays.

“After Jan. 1 we always get a bit of bolus of patients with additional complications who have been more naughty than nice over the holiday period,” Churchwell said. “They tend to wait until after the holiday time with all of their issues such as they’re out of their medication so their blood pressure is elevated; they’ve been having shortness of breath or chest discomfort or swelling due to too much sodium.”

Churchwell advises his patients to enjoy the holidays, but to try to integrate the heart healthy habits they have in place with the activities of the holidays. If you walk, walk with your family, and then try to get back to a regular exercise and diet routine after the holidays.

Cindy Osborn, a clinical dietitian with the Vanderbilt Heart and Vascular Institute, said that a 3- to 5-pound weight gain over the holidays is not uncommon. The typical holiday meal has between 2,500 and 3,000 calories, she said.

“This would be equivalent to two day’s worth of calories for a woman who was trying to lose weight,” Osborn said.

Osborn offers these tips for staying heart healthy during the holidays:

- Don't try to diet to lose weight during the holidays. Rather, set a goal of maintaining weight.
- Limit the celebration to one day and eat whatever you want, then go back to your heart healthy eating plan the next day.
- Avoid “saving calories” by skipping meals prior to an evening event so you are not tempted to overeat due to hunger.
- At a party try new foods rather than going for the chips and dips. If we try new items, we tend to eat smaller portions.
- Prior to attending a party have a snack high in protein such as yogurt, string cheese, cottage cheese, chicken or even a tablespoon of peanut butter.
- Remember turkey is a good choice -- it's very lean. Eggnog and alcohol, on the other hand, have lots of calories.
- Stand away from the buffet table. Fill your plate once and step away rather than hanging around and being tempted to nibble.
- Take a toothbrush with you. Brush your teeth and then keep a calorie-free beverage in your hand to sip on.
- Eat slowly and engage in conversation to help control portions consumed at meals. It takes your brain about 20 minutes to get the signal that it's full.
- If you take something to the party, modify it to make it low-fat so there is at least one item that is safe to eat.

Provided by Vanderbilt Medical Center

Citation: Doctors Warn Against Holiday Heart Attack Spike (2009, December 3) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-12-doctors-holiday-heart-spike.html>

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