

# Tips for having a heart-healthy holiday

December 21 2012, by Veronica Mcguire

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(Medical Xpress)—It's the season of joy, peace and goodwill, but it's also the time of year that brings a spike in heart attacks with most occurring on Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year's Day.

Dubbed by heart researchers as the "Merry Christmas Coronary," it can be triggered by [stressful events](#) or other risk factors, says [cardiologist](#) Dr. Greg Curnew, an associate clinical professor of medicine of McMaster's Michael G. [DeGroote](#) School of Medicine, on staff at Hamilton Health Sciences.

A heart attack – caused by a rupture of plaque in the wall of a coronary artery - strikes when you least suspect it, says Curnew. "It's like a volcano erupting."

Most heart deaths occur out of hospital, with one in four of those dying within one hour of their first-ever symptoms. He outlines heart attack signs as:

- Chest pain that lasts for at least 10 minutes – coming on suddenly or slowly – and feeling like heaviness or a steel band tightening around the chest.
- Chest discomfort that spreads to the neck, throat, jaw and shoulder, the back, arms and even the hands.
- For those who don't experience chest pain, be aware of discomfort in upper parts of the body.
- A choking feeling in the throat, or arms that feel heavy or

useless.

- Breathlessness, nausea or vomiting, a cold sweat, light-headedness.

"If you think you are having a [heart attack](#), this is not the time to call telemedicine or your family doctor. Get straight to the hospital," says Curnew.

He recommends chewing two baby Aspirins or taking one or two nitroglycerine tables three to five minutes apart – but not if you are on medication for [sexual dysfunction](#), such as Viagra – and call 911 immediately.

While it's the time of year for overindulging in rich, [salty foods](#), Curnew warns that eating just one fatty meal constricts blood flow in arteries for the next three to four hours.

He advises anyone taking [cholesterol-lowering drugs](#) to not stop taking their prescribed dosage.

Curnew offers potential New Year's resolutions for consideration:

- Learn basic life support skills and how to use an external defibrillator.
- Become an active participant in your health with your doctor and develop a health binder that you constantly update.
- Join the Good Food Box program; a non-profit fresh fruit and vegetable distribution program which makes fresh, high quality produce affordable and accessible to everyone.
- If you want to lose weight, join a group or find a health buddy.

"For me, this is a time of year to celebrate and to feel lucky to be here

for the holidays, and with a wish to be here next year, too," says Curnew.

Provided by McMaster University

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