

# Heart attack deaths are highest during December/January holiday season

December 15 2016

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## Heart Attack

Myocardial Infarction or Heart Attack. Credit: Blausen Medical Communications/Wikipedia/CC-A 3.0

According to a study published in *Circulation*, a journal of the American Heart Association (AHA), the winter holiday season is considered a risk factor for cardiac and noncardiac death.

While researchers don't know exactly why [heart](#) attacks are more common around [holidays](#), they note a number of possible reasons, including changes in diet and alcohol consumption during the holidays; stress from family interactions, strained finances, travel and entertaining; respiratory problems from burning wood; and not paying attention to the signs and symptoms of a [heart attack](#).

Consider the case of Julie Rickman, a 41-year-old stay-at-home mom.

"I felt like we were running around, going everywhere, and I just couldn't catch my breath," Rickman said. "I remember, two days before Christmas, we thought I was allergic to my live Christmas tree, and we took it down and got an artificial tree."

The day after Christmas, Rickman got winded while folding laundry. She thought it was exhaustion but decided to go to the emergency room, anyway. That trip saved her life. Along with two blockages in her heart, doctors also discovered she had suffered a heart attack.

"I have no idea when the heart attack happened. I was one of those women who attributed feeling bad to the holidays and thinking I was exhausted," she said.

"The progression of [heart disease](#) doesn't happen overnight, so an uptick in cardiac death during the holidays is actually more the acute manifestations of the disease," said Jorge Plutzky, M.D., a volunteer with the American Heart Association. "Factors like cold weather, stress and dietary indiscretion can contribute to a chain of events leading to more stress on the heart. A cardiac event might be triggered because the heart is working harder."

Rickman, now an American Heart Association Go Red For Women volunteer, has since changed her approach to the holidays and to life.

She cut out processed foods and limits sugar. She also limits social engagements and time spent on social media during the holidays and makes a conscious effort to realize being a supermom might not be reality.

"The biggest challenge is controlling stress," Rickman said. "I don't try to do it all. I have my list but it's not an ongoing list of unrealistic expectations."

That's good advice, especially because people who have had a heart attack are at increased risk of another, added Dr. Plutzky, director of preventive cardiology and cardiovascular medicine at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, Mass.

"Make sure the holidays don't get in the way of taking your medicines and continuing to be attentive to a healthy diet," he said. "But even when the holidays are passed, these things continue to be issues all year long because heart disease remains a leading threat to America's health."

The American Heart Association is helping heart attack survivors learn how to reduce that risk with a few simple but effective action steps:

- Take medication as directed
- Have a follow-up doctor's appointment
- Complete a cardiac rehabilitation program
- Manage risk factors
- Develop a strong support system.

The program is part of the association's Guideline Transformation and Optimization Initiative and is supported by an educational grant from AstraZeneca.

Provided by American Heart Association

Citation: Heart attack deaths are highest during December/January holiday season (2016, December 15) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-12-heart-deaths-highest-decemberjanuary-holiday.html>

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