

Holiday treats, hectic schedules may increase risk of heart attack

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Credit: American Heart Association

Between the ubiquitous goody trays, unending to-do lists and stressful travel itineraries, it can be tough to stay on track when it comes to health during the holiday season, whether it's sticking to a diet or maintaining an exercise regimen.

Such [holiday](#)-fueled pressures may also contribute to the fact that the holidays are also the most dangerous time of year for [heart](#) attacks.

Research shows deaths from heart attacks peak during December and January, possibly due to changes in diet and alcohol consumption, stress from family interactions, strained finances, travel and entertaining, and respiratory problems from burning wood.

"We tend to exercise less and eat more during the holidays," said John Osborne, M.D., Ph.D., a Dallas-area preventive cardiologist. "It's a very stressful time. There's a lot of emotion attached to the holidays and that can be another factor to why we have more [cardiovascular events](#)."

As the holidays upend routines, taking medications as prescribed can also get lost in the shuffle, Osborne said.

"I can't tell you how often I get calls from patients who have traveled somewhere and forgot their medications," he said, adding that he worries more about the patients who don't contact him. "Some people figure they'll be fine to be off them for a week or so, but if you start missing medications, that can have a big impact on causing your [blood pressure](#) to be out of control."

For those who have already had a [heart attack](#), the heightened risk during the holidays is particularly dangerous. That's because about one in five heart attack survivors age 45 and older will have another heart attack within five years.

Being with family during the holidays is a good time for patients to talk about their health history—not just heart attacks, but also [high blood pressure](#) and high cholesterol, experts say.

"We can dramatically lower the risk of cardiovascular events with lifestyle changes, but don't ignore your family history," Osborne said. "Genetics can catch up to you, even if you're doing all the right stuff."

Heart disease can be prevented in many cases through lifestyle factors, such as maintaining a healthy weight, exercising regularly, controlling cholesterol and blood pressure and not smoking, but "making [lifestyle changes](#) can be difficult," Osborne said.

"I admit to my patients that I don't love to exercise, but I really feel great having exercised," he said. "Getting that motivation can be painful, but it's fantastic when you get to the other side."

Osborne said tools such as mobile apps can provide education and electronic reminders to help people stay focused on heart health.

"I have a very brief period with [patients](#)," he said. "Tools like apps can encourage good health behaviors, being that gentle in-your-face technology."

More information: D. P. Phillips. Cardiac Mortality Is Higher Around Christmas and New Year's Than at Any Other Time: The Holidays as a Risk Factor for Death, *Circulation* (2004). DOI: [10.1161/01.CIR.0000151424.02045.F7](https://doi.org/10.1161/01.CIR.0000151424.02045.F7)

Provided by American Heart Association

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