

Heart attack deaths spike during the winter holidays

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The winter holidays can turn deadly as [research](#) shows that more people die from [heart attacks](#) during the last week of December than at any other time of the year.

While being aware of the signs of a [heart attack](#) and taking steps to reduce your risk are important all year long, the American Heart Association, the world's leading voluntary organization focused on heart and [brain health](#) for all, says that's especially critical during the next few weeks.

A number of scientific studies confirm this deadly phenomenon.

- A [study published in *Circulation*](#), the flagship journal of the American Heart Association, reported that more cardiac deaths occur in the U.S. on December 25 than on any other day of the year, followed by December 26 and January 1.
- In a [British Medical Journal study](#) reviewing more than 16 years of data on heart attacks among people in Sweden, there was a 15% overall increase in heart attacks during the winter holidays. Of particular note, heart attacks increased 37% on Dec. 24 (Christmas Eve), peaking at 10 p.m. and more often in people over 75 and those with diabetes or previous cardiovascular disease.
- A [study presented at the British Cardiovascular Society meeting](#) in June supported previous research finding more serious heart attacks occur on Mondays than any other day of the week. This year, Dec. 25 (Christmas Day) falls on a Monday.

"No one wants to think of tragedy during this joyous time of year as we gather with family and friends. However, these startling facts are very sobering. We don't know exactly what triggers this increase in heart attacks during the holidays; it's likely a combination of factors," said Johanna Contreras, M.D., M.Sc., FAHA, clinical volunteer for the American Heart Association and a cardiologist at Mt. Sinai Hospital System in New York City.

"Winter weather has been noted to increase heart attack risk due to

restricted blood flow when arteries may be constricted in cold temperatures. We also know the holidays bring a lot of added stress to many people. There are lots of parties and family gatherings where many tend to overindulge in rich foods and drink."

According to Contreras, one of the most critical factors might be that people ignore important warning signs of a heart attack or stroke.

"While you may not want to spend the holidays in a doctor's office or hospital, getting checked out and receiving prompt treatment if there is a problem is one of the best gifts you can give yourself and your loved ones for all the celebrations to come," she said.

Giving the gift of life may also come into play if you see someone experiencing heart attack or stroke symptoms. You could be out shopping at the mall, enjoying the sights and sounds of the holiday season, or spending time at a family gathering and witnessing someone having a heart attack and going into cardiac arrest. Starting CPR immediately and calling 9-1-1 could be the difference in life or death in those situations.

"Hands-Only CPR is something nearly everyone can learn and do. We encourage at least one person in every family to learn CPR because statistics show that most cardiac arrests occur outside the hospital and often in the home," Contreras said.

"The American Heart Association has a short instructional video at [Heart.org/HandsOnlyCPR](https://www.heart.org/hands-only-cpr). Watching the video and learning Hands-Only CPR could be a lifesaving and life-changing activity for the family to do together as you're gathered for the holidays."

Contreras notes that [family gatherings](#) are also a good time to talk about [family health history](#).

"Many of the health factors that impact heart disease and stroke are heredity," she said. "If any of your parents, siblings, or grandparents have had a heart attack or stroke, you are likely at higher risk, too. But the good news is you can lower your risk with preventive measures. Knowing that history is an important first step."

The following are several heart-healthy tips for the upcoming holidays:

- **Know symptoms and take action:** [Heart attack signs](#) and [stroke symptoms](#) vary in men and women and it's important to recognize them early and call 9-1-1 for help. The sooner medical treatment begins, the better the chances of survival and preventing heart damage.
- **Celebrate in moderation** Eating healthfully during the holidays doesn't have to mean depriving yourself; there are still ways to [eat smart](#). Look for small, healthy changes and swaps you can make so you continue to feel your best while eating and drinking in moderation, and don't forget to [watch your salt intake](#).
- **Plan for peace on earth and goodwill toward yourself:** Make time to take care of yourself during the busy holiday. [Reduce stress](#) from family interactions, strained finances, hectic schedules, and other stressors prevalent this time of year, including [traveling](#).
- **Keep moving:** The American Heart Association recommends at least [150 minutes](#) of physical activity per week and this number usually drops during the hustle and bustle of the holidays. Get creative with ways to stay active, even if it's going for a family [walk](#) or another [fun activity](#) you can do with your loved ones.
- **Stick to your meds:** Busy holidays can cause you to skip medications, forgetting them when away from home or not getting refills in a timely manner. The American Heart Association has a [medication chart](#) to help stay on top of it, and be sure to keep tabs on your [blood pressure](#) numbers.

"We do know there are ways to mitigate your risk for a deadly heart attack. So, we encourage everyone to pause during the [holiday](#) hustle and bustle and make note of these important steps that could be lifesaving," Contreras said.

The American Heart Association has more on ways to live [heart](#)-healthy during the holidays and all year long at [heart.org](#).

Provided by American Heart Association

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