

Heart attacks spike during holidays: Tips to protect yourself

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Late December is typically a time when holiday stress and winter weather can collide, creating a perfect recipe for a rise in heart attacks and stroke.

Luckily, one expert has some advice on how to dodge the danger.

"When we look across the year in terms of [heart attack](#) rates, what we see is fairly constant rates week by week with two exceptions: One is that there's a broad, shallow dip in [summer months](#) and, two, there is a very short spike of about 30 to 40% in the last couple weeks of the year

between Christmas and New Year's," said cardiologist [Dr. Donald Lloyd-Jones](#), chair of the department of preventive medicine at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine.

"During the [holiday season](#), there are different stresses like dealing with your in-laws and travel arrangements that may add stress," he explained in a Northwestern news release. "We're often knocked off our eating and sleeping patterns, we tend to consume more alcohol, we're not pursuing our typical physical activity and we may get thrown off our medication schedule."

Add wintry weather to that mix, and the heart health dangers ramp up, he added.

"Cold weather also is a problem because when we breathe [cold air](#), it chills the blood in our lungs and causes constriction of blood vessels. The first blood vessels downstream from the lungs are the coronary arteries, which are particularly affected by the [cold weather](#)," Lloyd-Jones said.

"Pursuing cold-weather activities, like shoveling, may be especially hazardous because we might overdo it, plus we're wearing extra layers, which could cause us to overheat," he noted. "It's a perfect storm to maximize stress on the heart."

How do you know when that stress has triggered a heart attack?

For men, symptoms include heavy, crushing chest pressure in the middle of chest and/or sudden, unexplained shortness of breath. Meanwhile, women tend to experience more subtle signs, such as shortness of breath, profound fatigue or lightheadedness, Lloyd-Jones said.

With stroke, symptoms known by the acronym FAST all point to trouble:

- Face drooping
- Arm or leg weakness on one side
- Speech difficulty
- Time to call 911

If you experience any of these symptoms, head straight to the emergency room, Lloyd-Jones said.

"We have two kidneys and two lungs, but only one heart and one brain, so it's much safer to err on the side of caution," Lloyd-Jones said.

"If there's any doubt, get checked out in person. At best, hopefully you are aborting a heart attack or stroke," he said. "Time is [heart muscle](#), time is [brain cells](#), and so time is of the essence. The sooner you seek help in that situation, the sooner we can save your life or brain."

More information: Visit the American Heart Association for more on [cold weather and cardiovascular disease](#).

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