

Flu, COVID are spreading: Protect your heart say doctors

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Flu and COVID are sweeping across the country, posing a particular

hazard to people at risk for heart disease. These respiratory infections can trigger heart complications from fever, dehydration and inflammation, experts from Mount Sinai Fuster Heart Hospital say.

Mount Sinai doctors are seeing an increase in heart problems prompted by respiratory infections, and it's happening across all age groups—even among young adults in their 20s.

Inflammation can prompt heart attacks in people with clogged arteries, and it can also exacerbate symptoms related to [heart failure](#) or heart rhythm disorders, doctors said.

"Winter can raise cardiovascular risks in a number of ways, including due to flu season," said Dr. Deepak Bhatt, director of the Mount Sinai Fuster Heart Hospital.

"People with [cardiovascular disease](#) or multiple risk factors for heart disease are particularly susceptible to developing cardiac problems if they get really sick from a respiratory infection," Bhatt said in a hospital news release. "Identifying and controlling cardiovascular risk factors, as well as basic measures to try to prevent infections, are ways to avoid a potential double whammy of a bad infection triggering a [heart attack](#)."

Heart disease is the leading cause of death among U.S. men and women, and nearly half of adults have some type of heart disease.

Nearly 700,000 people die every year from heart disease, and eight out of 10 deaths are preventable, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

High [blood pressure](#), elevated cholesterol, diabetes, excess weight, smoking and age are all risk factors for heart disease.

Ways to limit your risk of heart disease—and the likelihood that an infection will cause heart problems—include:

- Knowing your family history of [heart problems](#)
- Tracking your blood pressure, total cholesterol, "good" HDL cholesterol, body-mass index and blood sugar levels
- Eating healthy
- Limiting alcohol consumption to one drink a day
- Quitting smoking and vaping
- Exercising regularly
- Lowering stress and focusing on mental health
- Learning the warning signs of heart attack and stroke—chest discomfort, shortness of breath, breaking out in a cold sweat, lightheadedness and pain in the arms, back, neck or jaw

"If you get sick and have chest pain or are out of breath, and it's getting worse—especially if you have an underlying heart condition or [risk factors](#) such as obesity, diabetes or a family history of heart disease—don't assume it's not serious or just a viral syndrome," said Dr. Icilma Fergus, director of cardiovascular disparities for the Mount Sinai Health System.

"Consider seeing a health care provider right away, and call 911 if the symptoms of chest pain, dizziness or shortness of breath develop," Fergus added.

Fergus recommends that people get their appropriate flu and COVID vaccinations, to lessen the severity of any infection they might get.

"Viral syndromes are so commonplace that many people aren't taking these viruses as seriously anymore," Fergus said.

What this means for you

People at risk for [heart disease](#) should know that infection with flu or COVID can make it more likely they'll suffer a heart attack or other heart-related complications.

More information: Harvard Medical School has more about [flu and the heart](#).

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