

BEWARE OF THE HOLIDAY HEART SYNDROME

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I woke up early this morning and had my morning cup of coffee in our garden. The cool breeze gently reminded me that the holiday season is upon us, and with the merriment that comes with it is the increased risk of developing life-threatening cardiovascular problems.



For some families who would be affected, this can transform the season from one of joy and laughter to one of lamentation and grief.

So, beware of the so-called “holiday heart syndrome.”

Various scientific journals have reported a higher incidence of heart attacks and strokes during the Christmas holidays due to excessive fun, which consists of drinking unlimited booze and eating all the “good” stuff (aka high cholesterol food).

Some may think that alcohol is a stimulant which can release one’s inhibitions and let go of one’s free spirit, but the fact is, it has a direct depressant effect on the heart muscles immediately upon ingestion, and much more so, with regular or chronic intake.

Social drinking

We used to think that social drinking, or drinking in moderation, was acceptable and even considered healthy. Now we know better, and realize what fairly recent scientific data is admonishing us with—that even moderate quantities of alcohol associated with social drinking can be harmful.

Internationally esteemed cardiologist professor Eugene Braunwald notes in the latest edition of his book, “Heart Disease,” the standard reference book of most cardiologists worldwide, that even normal individuals can experience an adverse effect on the heart and the way it beats after consuming moderate amounts of alcohol.

A sudden change in the heartbeat, making it irregular, called atrial fibrillation, can develop suddenly, which can lead to more serious complications. The good news is

that it's usually just transient, and can dissipate through rest and alcohol abstinence.

A few Christmases ago, we were called to attend to a prominent personality in the emergency room, just past midnight on Christmas Eve. He had had a little too much to drink, and thought he could neutralize it with three cups of strong coffee.

Almost deadly

The ethanol in the wine and the high dose of caffeine combined in an almost deadly concoction that made his heart rate pump 150 beats per minute. True enough, he was in atrial fibrillation with a rapid heart rate.

Fortunately for him, his heart rhythm went back to normal the following day. But he had to spend his Christmas Day in the coronary care unit with no visitors allowed except for his immediate family. A big Christmas party scheduled at their posh residence had to be cancelled.

Even relatively young men and women can fall victim to the holiday heart syndrome. In an Elsevier journal published a few months ago, Indian physicians P. Bhardwaj and S. Chaudhury discussed several cases of under-40 males who were rushed to the hospital during the holiday season, all having heart palpitations after intake of varying quantities of alcohol drinks. All of them showed irregular heart-beat on electrocardiogram, but which reverted back to normal the following day.

Potentially serious

The holiday heart syndrome is a real, potentially serious, medical problem. Although most normal patients have hearts that will usually revert to normal within 24 to 48 hours, a few unlucky ones can develop a heart attack and go into cardiac arrest even before they reach the hospital.

This is especially true for people who have undetected or undiagnosed heart problems. Many high-risk patients remain symptom-free, but the holiday heart syndrome may lead to the tipping point that can put their lives on the line.

Aside from alcohol ingestion, there are other factors that can increase one's stress level during the holidays, and elevate one's cortisol or stress hormone in the blood. Just imagine the mounting stress of having to go from one Christmas party to another, and making sure one has gifts for everyone.

The elevated cortisol and adrenaline, another stress-related hormone in the blood, fuels the engine of a potential cardiovascular catastrophe.

It's good if one survives a heart attack or a stroke. Many are not that fortunate and may succumb before reaching the hospital, or before they could even finish the crispy pata they're eating.

If one has some risk factors like smoking, overweight, hypertension, cholesterol problems and diabetes, and he or she has not had a checkup lately, it may be best to have one, to keep from being a victim of holiday heart syndrome.

Better safe than sorry.

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