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Study Shows That You Are Over 25% More Likely to Have a Heart Attack in Winter

Doesn't matter if you live in Hollywood, MD or Hollywood, CA

Tips on how to lower your odds

Leonardtwn MD -(February 12)- A recent study into the long-held belief that more heart attacks occur in the winter than other times of the year has startled the cardiology community – not because this thinking is flawed, but because of just how true it is.

According to research published in the American Heart Association journal *Circulation* you're more likely to die of heart-related issues in the winter – no matter what climate you live in.

This finding is making a lot of news because colder temperatures were thought to be the determining factor for the higher winter death rates, notes Terence Bertele, MD, the chief cardiologist with southern Maryland's Chesapeake & Washington Heart Care. This study however, indicates that whether you live in Hollywood, MD, or in Hollywood, CA, you are much more likely to die of a heart attack, heart failure, cardiac disease or stroke during the winter months.

The researchers, Bryan Swartz, M.D. and Robert Kloner, M.D., Ph.D., analyzed 2005-'08 death certificate data from seven U.S. locations with different climates: Los Angeles County, Calif.; Texas; Arizona; Georgia; Washington; Pennsylvania and Massachusetts.

In all areas, total winter heart attack deaths rose an average 26 percent to 36 percent from the summer low to the winter peak over four years. Seasonal patterns of cardiac deaths were very similar in the seven different climate patterns. Death rates at all sites clustered closely together and no one site was statistically different from any other site.

While the study did not shed light on the specific causes that might drive up the death rates, a number of theories exist. Among the most cited is the increased risk of respiratory infections during the winter – a constant throughout different parts of the country.

“Contracting the flu or other infection certainly increases the chances of hospital admissions for heart attacks and congestive heart failure,” reports Bertele. “And everywhere that people have a winter season, they also have a flu season.”

“This is yet another reason that in the winter it is especially important to avoid infection through such simple steps as frequent and thorough hand washing, getting a flu shot and pneumonia vaccine (if your circumstances warrant it) and seeking early medical attention for serious colds and fevers,” he says. Bertele adds that good dental hygiene and regular dental check-ups are also important to reduce your risk.

The researchers speculated that another factor that might contribute to the increased wintertime health hazard is the fact that people generally don’t take as good care of themselves in the winter as they do in summer. Schwartz, now a cardiology fellow at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, said, “It’s known that people are not quite as healthy in the wintertime – their diet is not as good people tend not to exercise a little bit less and gain weight.”

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a kind of depression that usually occurs in the winter, might also play a role. This is because, according to Bertele, “depression can actually cause chemical changes in the body that can increase stress on the cardiovascular system.”

Outward symptoms include increased appetite with weight gain, fatigue, social withdrawal and irritability. “A health care provider can help manage SAD with counseling, light therapy and/or medication,” he said.

No matter what the trigger, most cardiac deaths are caused by a disruption of the plaque that accumulates on the walls of the blood vessels. “The human heart depends on three small tubes on the outside of the heart,” explained Thomas Haywood, M.D., also with Chesapeake & Washington Heart Care. Haywood, who holds board certification in nuclear cardiology, cardiology and internal medicine, notes that these tubes or coronary arteries are the thickness of a ballpoint pen refill.

“A fast food diet, high blood pressure, smoking, diabetes and other factors result in deposits in these tubes called plaque,” he said. “They can occupy between 10 and 90 percent of the thickness of the artery without causing damage. Trouble occurs when the plaque is destabilized, whether by infection or other causes, which can also include abrupt exercise such as snow shoveling.”

The increased danger of heart attacks and stroke continues through early March, but the cardiologists all agree that taking care of your heart – and your overall health – should be a year-round affair.

For more information, or to schedule an appointment with a cardiologist, contact Chesapeake & Washington Heart Care, 301.645.5100 (Waldorf) or 301.475.3240 (Leonardtown), or go to www.chesheart.com.

Photo Cut Line: Dr. Terence Bertele, a Southern Maryland cardiologist, has advise on how to reduce the risks of winter heart attacks. Photo credit: Darrin Farrell

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