

# Heart attack deaths spike during holidays

**THE AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION**  
LEXINGTON — 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, devoted to changing the future to a world of healthier lives for all, says that's especially critical during the next few weeks.

And, in rural communities, where EMS responses can be delayed and minutes matter, it's important to be aware of the signs and symptoms and seek treatment quickly.

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 percent overall increase in heart attacks during the winter holidays. Of particular note, heart attacks increased 37

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**Dr. Shelley Stanko**  
*CHI Saint Joseph Health*

percent 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.

"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 Dr. Shelley Stanko, family physician and interim market chief medical officer with CHI Saint Joseph Health.

"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 Stanko, 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 witness 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," Stanko said.

"The American Heart Association has a short instructional video at [Heart.org/HandsOnly](http://Heart.org/HandsOnly) CPR. Watching the video and learning hands-only CPR could be a lifesaving and lifechanging activity for the family to do together as you're gathered for the holidays."

Stanko 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 risks with preventive measures. Knowing that history is an

important first step."

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," Stanko said.

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

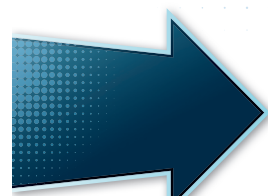
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*Supported by more than 35 million volunteers globally, we fund groundbreaking research, advocate for the public's health, and provide critical resources to save and improve lives affected by cardiovascular disease and stroke. By driving breakthroughs and implementing proven solutions in science, policy, and care, we work tirelessly to advance health and transform lives every day.*

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