Why the young have heart attacks



YOUR HEALTH

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The sudden death of someone in their twenties, thirties or forties shocks friends, relatives and neighbours. Somehow, we expect heart attacks to happen only to older people. Some young adults become anxious and seek check-ups. Others assume that such misfortune can only strike others. Neither panic nor complacency helps. Understanding our risks and acting on them does.

A heart attack and sudden cardiac arrest are different events. A heart attack occurs when blood flow through a coronary artery is blocked, usually by a clot forming over a ruptured fatty plaque. In cardiac arrest, an electrical disturbance causes the heart to stop pumping effectively. A heart attack can trigger cardiac arrest.



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Men tend to develop coronary artery disease earlier than women. Cardiovascular risk for women rises after menopause, because falling oestrogen levels affect the lipid profile and blood vessels.

The family history offers valuable clues — there could be a propensity for heart disease if young relatives died suddenly without an explanation. Inherited familial hypercholesterolaemia causes markedly elevated LDL cholesterol from a young age, accelerating plaque formation in the arteries. Another inherited condition is hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, in which the heart muscle becomes abnormally thick. This can interfere with the pumping and electrical conduction systems.

Excess body fat, particularly around the abdomen, increases the likelihood of diabetes, hypertension and high cholesterol levels. These conditions can damage the arteries long before symptoms appear.

Body mass index, or BMI, is calculated by dividing weight in kilograms by height in metres squared. Although imperfect, it remains a useful screening tool. Using commonly applied Indian cut-offs, a BMI of 23-24.9 indicates one is overweight and 25 or above indicates obesity. A waist circumference of 90cm or more in men, or 80cm or more in women, signals increased abdominal fat and metabolic risk.

Regular physical activity helps control weight, blood pressure and blood sugar. Adults should aim for 150-300 minutes of moderate aerobic activity each week, such as brisk walking, cycling, swimming or dancing. Add strength training exercises at least two days a week. Break up long periods of sitting with short walks. Exercise works best with a healthy diet.

- Calorie requirements vary with age, body size, activity and health
- Base meals on vegetables, fruit, pulses, whole grains and suitable protein sources
- Avoid sweet drinks (even with artificial sweeteners), processed snacks and deep-fried foods
- Avoid industrial trans fats, limit saturated fat and keep total salt intake below one teaspoon a day, including salt present in food
- Measure cooking oil
- Avoid tobacco in every form, including cigarettes, *bidis* and chewing tobacco. Vaping is not a safe alternative. Tobacco damages blood vessels and promotes clot formation. Quitting is one of the most effective steps towards protecting the heart.

Check for diabetes, hypertension and high cholesterol often as they usually show no symptoms. A preventive consultation should include a review of family history, tobacco use, weight, waist circumference and blood pressure, with blood sugar and lipid testing. Further tests should be guided by symptoms and individual risk.

Do not ignore chest pressure, unexplained breathlessness, fainting during exercise, palpitations or dizziness. Persistent chest discomfort, especially with sweating, nausea or pain spreading to the arm or jaw, requires immediate emergency care. If someone collapses and is unresponsive, call an ambulance or take them urgently to a hospital.

Being young does not guarantee a healthy heart. Prevention starts with knowing your risks and building healthy daily habits.

The writer has a family practice at Vellore and is the author of *Staying Healthy in Modern India*. If you have questions on health issues, write to *yourhealthgm@yahoo.co.in*