

Cold Weather and Heart Health

Written by Nicole Flanagan



Although winter is a beautiful time of the year, it brings low temperatures, shorter daylight hours and snow (only once every few years here). Cold weather can strain the heart, and according to research, increase the risk for a heart attack. Many people are not even aware that they are at risk until they have a heart attack, so it's very important to know the risk factors.

The risk of heart disease increases if you're older, a smoker, overweight, have high blood pressure, don't exercise enough or have a stress-filled life. Heart problems can also be hereditary. If you're at risk, you must be especially careful during the winter months. Why?

Colder temperatures cause your blood vessels to get smaller, which reduces the flow of blood and oxygen supply to your heart. Your blood becomes thicker when temperatures drop, and this can cause an increase in the risk of clotting. Cold weather can also lead to an increase in blood pressure, which puts more stress on your heart. If you're not used to exercising, your risk of a heart attack during winter weather may increase from overexertion. If you are not accustomed to exercise, shoveling snow or even walking in deep or heavy snow can trigger a heart attack. If you don't know the dangers of being outdoors in cold weather, you could suffer from hypothermia—an abnormally low body temperature. Most deaths from this condition are caused by heart failure.

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It is also important to know the signs of a heart attack. If you experience any of the following signs you should call 9-1-1.

-chest pain, pressure or discomfort

-pain, pressure or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach

-shortness of breath

-cold sweat

-nausea

-lightheadedness

Heart healthy living can be part of your lifestyle year round. Factors like diet and exercise contribute to a healthy heart every day. For heart healthy nutrition, avoid foods that are high in saturated fats such as cheese, whole milk and butter. Eat plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables. Different fruits and vegetables are available at certain times of the year, try and stick to produce that is in season. Eating lean meats and fish will get you those heart healthy omega-3's. Limiting sodium intake can keep blood pressure in normal range and decrease your risk for heart attacks. When it comes to exercise the American Heart Association recommends at least 30minutes of exercise about five days per week. Exercise can include anything that makes your body burn calories such as jogging, swimming or biking. Walking can be one of the easiest ways to improve your heart health.

Even though it does not look like we will be doing much shoveling in Old Town this year, it has been quite cold. Just remember that when temperatures drop, the risk for heart attacks and hypothermia go up. Dress in layers and know the signs and keep yourself protected with a healthy diet and daily exercise.

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