



Your Heart, Stopped Cold

The season of cheer may trigger an avalanche of arterial trouble. Don't let it bury you

BY MELISSA GOTTHARDT • PHOTOGRAPH BY LEVI BROWN

A LIFT TICKET MAY NOT BE THE ONLY TAG YOU WEAR THIS season. If you tangle with Old Man Winter, you could end up in the morgue with a toe tag. Cause of death? Heart attack. The incidence of chest-clutching catastrophes spikes 40 percent during the colder months compared with summertime, Japanese researchers say. “Snow shoveling is probably the winter heart threat that’s most familiar to men,” says John Eleftheriades, M.D., a *Men’s Health* cardiology advisor and director of the Aortic Institute at Yale–New Haven Hospital. “But there are lesser-known seasonal factors that can place your heart at risk.” Fortunately, sidestepping the most chilling heart threats is simple—if you know what to do. Read on to find out how you can downgrade the danger to bunny-slope level.

Pop styling: Elizabeth Press

WINTER HEART HAZARD

Frigid air

Cold weather strains your heart as much as your heating budget. The average person’s heart attack risk climbs 2 percent with every 1.8°F drop in temperature, British scientists report. “Inhaling very cold air through your mouth chills your coronary arteries, which then constrict,” says NYU cardiologist Howard Weintraub, M.D. This can dangerously reduce the volume of blood being pumped to your heart, especially if your arteries are clogged. “If you have a mild to moderate blockage—say, 20 to 40 percent—an hour of exposure to cold air can amplify that to upwards of 80 percent,” says Dr. Weintraub. This can lead to chest pain during low-intensity outdoor activity, such as walking uphill. If you have a more severe blockage, it could even trigger a heart attack.

PROTECT YOURSELF Wrap a scarf loosely around your nose and mouth so the icy air is warmed before it hits your lungs, says Dr. Weintraub. But watch out: As your moist breath makes the scarf clammy, its warming properties diminish. So if you brave the cold for longer than an hour (especially during exercise), wear a face mask lined with a moisture-wicking material, such as the Seirus Neofleece Combo Scarf (\$25, rei.com). And pay extra attention to your hands and feet. Freezing temperatures constrict blood vessels in your fingers and toes, forcing your heart to work harder to pump blood to your extremities. All bundled up but still feel chest pain or pressure? Call 911 immediately.

WINTER HEART HAZARD

Short, dim days

In the winter, your body’s supply of vitamin D drops right along with your tolerance for Christmas music. That’s bad news for your heart: According to a 2010 study conducted at Utah’s Intermountain Medical Center, people with the lowest levels of vitamin D are 45 percent more likely to develop coronary heart disease or have a heart attack than those with normal levels. The reason isn’t entirely clear, but study author J. Brent Muhlestein, M.D., points to research showing that vitamin D keeps a lid on your kidneys’ levels of renin, an enzyme that can elevate blood pressure.

PROTECT YOURSELF Reach for fatty fish, which are packed with vitamin D. Salmon, tuna, and mackerel are good choices, as are eggs and D-fortified milk. Although the Institute of Medicine recommends 600 IU of D a day, request a 25-hydroxy vitamin D blood test so your doctor can customize your dosage, says Dr. Muhlestein. If you do require an extra dose of D, opt for a D₃ supplement and take it with your largest meal of the day. Doing this may increase your absorption of the vitamin by 50 percent, say Cleveland Clinic scientists.

WINTER HEART HAZARD

Forgotten flu shot

Which would you prefer: a little jab in your arm, or a crushing pain in your chest? A Texas Heart Institute study found that people’s likelihood of death due to heart attack spiked 30 percent when influenza rates peaked. The viral infection causes inflammation, which can disturb arterial plaque and cause clots to form,

One night of binge drinking could be enough to trigger an abnormal heartbeat.

explains study author Mohammad Madjid, M.D. He estimates that if all eligible Americans were vaccinated every year, heart-related deaths would drop by 90,000 annually.

PROTECT YOURSELF Roll up your sleeve. It’s not too late for a flu shot, because the virus may stay active until March. And make sure your family follows suit, says Dr. Madjid. “The flu vaccine isn’t 100 percent effective, so if someone brings the virus into your home, your chance of becoming infected increases—even if you’ve been vaccinated.” If you do get sick, don’t fight the chills with a dunk in the tub. A hot bath on a cold day could raise your heart-attack risk. How? The rapid increase in body temp can lead to a heart-stressing drop in blood pressure, a Japanese study found. Instead, sponge off with lukewarm (about 70°F) water.

WINTER HEART HAZARD

An overzealous workout

Don’t try to make up for a whole season of sloth and gluttony with a few days of sweat and grunting. A recent Tufts University analysis found that a person’s risk of having a heart attack more than triples 1 to 2 hours after exercise. If you’re fit you shouldn’t worry, since your baseline risk of a heart attack is probably low. But if your most recent workout involved the lever on your La-Z-Boy, strenuous exercise could spell

trouble. “Your body’s response to exercise—a rise in heart rate and blood pressure—may be exaggerated when you’re deconditioned,” says Gordon Tomaselli, M.D., chief of cardiology at Johns Hopkins University. “If you have undetected heart disease, this could result in heart attack and death.”

PROTECT YOURSELF This isn’t a doctor’s note to skip the gym. Simply monitor your heart rate to keep your intensity at a safe level. For the first 2 weeks, aim for 60 percent of your heart rate max (subtract your age from 220, then multiply the result by 0.6), and maintain that intensity for 20 minutes. “You’ll improve your fitness without creating undue cardiac risks,” says *Men’s Health* fitness advisor Alex Koch, Ph.D. Gradually increase your target heart rate by 5 percent every 2 weeks.

WINTER HEART HAZARD

Too much holiday cheer

Tossing back the yuletide libations too quickly can have a sobering effect on your heart. It’s what doctors call “holiday heart syndrome,” a disruption of your heart’s normal rhythm caused by overconsumption of alcohol. “One night of binge drinking may be enough to overstimulate the nerve pathways that regulate your heart’s rhythm,” warns Laurence Sperling, M.D., director of preventive cardiology at Emory University. This usually has no lasting impact in otherwise healthy folks; if you have an underlying arterial blockage, however, the abnormal heartbeat caused by the condition could provoke a heart attack, says Dr. Sperling.

PROTECT YOURSELF Limit yourself to two or three servings of alcohol per occasion. In a 2010 Canadian review, men who downed about five drinks’ worth of alcohol had a greater risk of abnormal heartbeat than nondrinkers did. To pace yourself, hold your drink in your nondominant hand; you won’t raise your glass to your lips as automatically, says Dr. Sperling. Then rethink your buffet binge: Salty foods can spike BP, while fatty foods can cause arteries to spasm. Overindulging in either (or both) can conspire with alcohol to increase your risk of holiday heart. ■

CAUTION: ROADS ARE SLICK (AND YOU’RE NOT)

We asked Ted Plank, road supervisor for Colorado’s Boulder County department of transportation, how to avoid the winter driving mistakes men make most often.

DRIVING TOO FAST

You should stay 10 to 20 miles per hour below the speed limit, especially if the air temp is between 25° and 40°F. When snow is slushy, it doesn’t cling to your tires, so you’re more likely to slide.

RACING WITH SEMIS

Truckers sit three times higher than you do; at your level there’s more visual interference. For better visibility, buy winter wiper blades. Their rubber jackets keep ice out of the moving parts.

IGNORING YOUR TIRES

Check your all-weather tread: If it’s less than half its original height, invest in winter tires. Inflate winter rubber 3 to 5 psi higher than all-season tires to boost the stability of the softer compound.

DRIVING BACK ROADS

“These are the guys we find stuck in snowdrifts,” says Plank. Stick to main roads and keep your gas tank at least half full—the extra weight provides traction for freeing your vehicle if you do get stuck.