

## AVOID A CARDIAC CHALLENGE DURING THE HOLIDAYS

**GET** a flu shot.

**EXERCISE**, but don't overdo it.

**EAT** right.

**DON'T** smoke.

**DON'T** overindulge.

**AIM** to maintain your weight.

**DO NOT** postpone doctor visits.

**GET** your rest.

**MANAGE** diabetes.

**LOWER** high blood pressure.

SOURCES: AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION, CARDIOLOGISTS



CARRIE ROSEMA/THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

Heart attack survivor Nicholas Koluncich, of San Bernardino, exercises regularly at the Weaver Health and Fitness Center at St. Bernardine Medical Center in San Bernardino since his second heart bypass surgery.

# HEART ATTACK SEASON

**HOLIDAYS:** Doctors tell how to lessen potentially deadly stress and strain normal this time of year.

BY AMANDA STRINDBERG  
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

Eat, drink and be merry — but don't overdo it.

That's the warning from cardiologists, who say they see more heart trouble during the holidays than any other time of year.

It's heart attack season when rich foods, more alcohol, less exercise, stress, cold weather and the flu put more strain on the heart, Inland cardiologists said.

"People are eating more, drinking more and may not be exercising," said Riverside cardiologist K.V. Patankar. "This can all lead to higher risk."

A 1998 University of Massachusetts Medical School study found 53 percent more heart attacks occur in the winter months than in the summer months. People also are more likely to die from heart disease during these months, with deaths spiking on Christmas and New Year's Day, according to a 2004 study that

examined a U.S. database of 53 million deaths between 1973 and 2001.

"This can be a very stressful time for people," said cardiologist Sunil Rao, an assistant professor at Duke University Medical Center who has studied holiday heart attacks. "There is no doubt that social variables are part of this."

### STRESSFUL SEASON

San Bernardino resident Nicholas Koluncich, 76, became a holiday heart attack victim on New Year's Eve of 1982. Then the owner of two liquor stores, he spent

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# HEALTH: Doctors urge seeking immediate attention for holiday heart attacks

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the day preparing his staff and stores for the busiest night of the year.

Instead of ending up at holiday parties, Koluncich was rushed to the emergency room at St. Bernardine Medical Center in San Bernardino after experiencing chest pain, nausea and shortness of breath.

"My time was due," he said. "Plus it was likely stress on the occasion of a night of big business. I liked the accelerated business, but I was always happy when it was over."

Shortly after the heart attack, Koluncich underwent a quadruple bypass and began to change his diet — less red meat and potatoes and more chicken and veggies. But 18 years later, his arteries clogged again, leading to a triple bypass.

"That's it — they can't do me again," he said.

Koluncich keeps his heart healthy now by working out five days a week at St. Bernardine's Weaver Health and Fitness Center.

"I leave with a bounce in my step and renewed energy," he said. "I'm feeling really good. Seventy-six and counting."

To prevent holiday stress, he does Christmas shopping and plans the holiday social calendar in November.

"Christmas is a stressful time of year," he said. "I think everyone is happy when it's over."

Cardiologists don't get any relief in January when "New Year's resolutioners" head back to the gym and often overexert themselves.

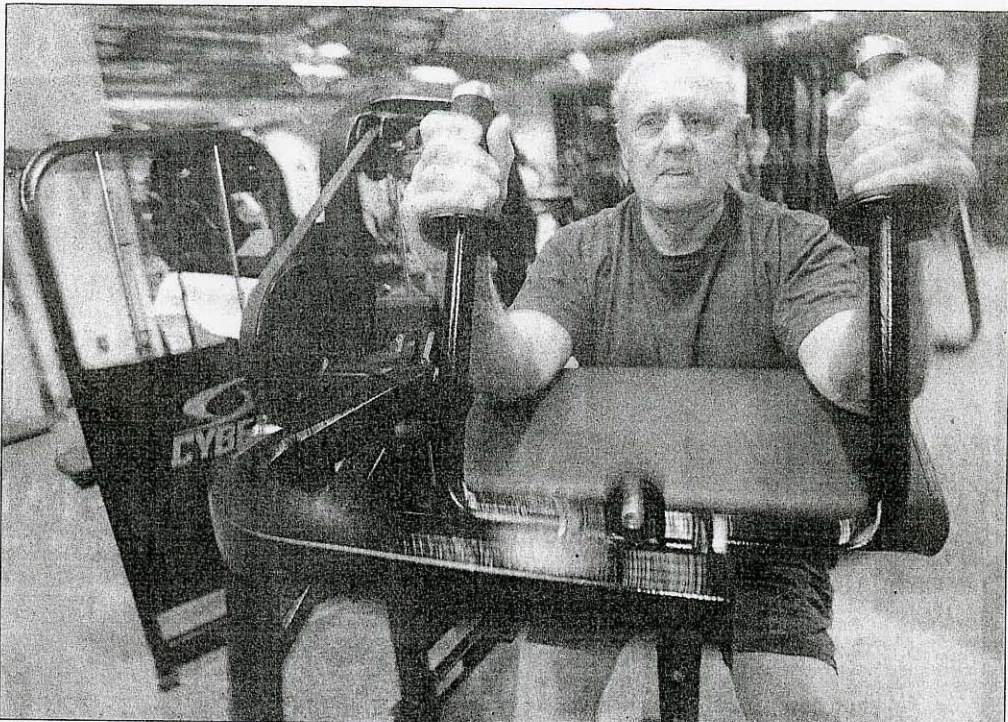
"It's always a good idea to start out slowly," said Dr. Kenneth Jutzy, head of the cardiology division at Loma Linda University Medical Center. "You don't want to put too much strain on the cardiovascular system."

Credit card bills arriving after the New Year detailing holiday over-spending don't help.

"Financial pressures and anxiety increase blood pressure," Patankar said.

## DELAY CAN BE DEADLY

One factor that might make the holiday heart attack more fatal than one in the summer is



GARRIE ROSEMA/THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

Nicholas Koluncich, of San Bernardino, 76, became a holiday heart attack victim on New Year's Eve of 1982. The owner of two liquor stores, he found himself getting a quadruple bypass instead of partying.

## WARNING SIGNS

**DISCOMFORT** or pain in the chest

**NUMBNESS** or tingling in the arms

**NAUSEA** or vomiting

**EXTREME** fatigue

**SHORTNESS** of breath

**INDIGESTION** or heartburn

**EXTREME** sweating

**DIZZINESS**, weakness or passing out

**BACK**, neck or jaw pain

SOURCES: AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION, CARDIOLOGISTS, NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH

ignoring symptoms during the hustle and bustle of the season, cardiologists say.

"Nobody wants to go to the doctor or be in the hospital during the holidays," Jutzy

said. "People are more likely to postpone asking for help."

Patankar said the emergency department at Parkview Community Hospital in Riverside typically gets a surge in patients with heart trouble at the end of Christmas Day.

"They put it off and put it off," he said. "They've been busy and don't want to inconvenience family."

Cardiologist Ashish Mukherjee, director of St. Bernardine's Inland Empire Heart and Vascular Institute, said those traveling also tend to shrug off symptoms.

"They don't want to wake up the relatives or interrupt the party," he said.

Some also chalk up the pain to indigestion after indulging in too many holiday goodies, Muk-

herjee said.

All symptoms should be taken seriously. Every minute matters when it comes to heart attacks, cardiologists warn.

"The earlier people get help the more likely they are to survive an attack and have better long-term heart function," Jutzy said.

## AVOIDING CHRISTMAS CORONARY

Much of what causes holiday heart attacks can be prevented. Many cardiologists supply patients with coping strategies before heart attack season.

Patankar urges his patients to get a flu shot, because being sick can add to the burden of a stressed heart. He reinforces healthy eating habits and the importance of exercise and moderate drinking. One too

many glasses of cheer and blood pressure goes up, causing the heart to work harder, he said.

He also recommends that traveling patients take medical records and make sure prescriptions are filled. To deal with the hectic pace of the season, he recommends yoga.

Jutzy preaches a similar message.

"It's hard, but don't abandon your healthy lifestyle," he tells his patients.

Koluncich said he makes it a point to keep up his routine. On New Year's Eve, he can typically be found at the gym.

"I always remember that day when I had a heart attack," he said. "I like to commemorate it with a workout."

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