

Surprising No. 1 Cause of Heart Attacks

If you don't want to keel over from a heart attack tomorrow, take time to smell the roses today. More than age, marital status, blood pressure and smoking, anxiety is the top cause of heart attacks, according to a study from the Lown Cardiovascular Research Foundation of Massachusetts.

The results were astounding: People who cut their stress levels and kept them under control had a whopping 60 percent reduced chance of suffering a heart attack or stroke than did constant worriers, reports Agence France Presse. The findings were based on a three-to-four-year study of 516 heart patients, 44 of whom suffered non-fatal heart attacks and 19 of whom died from a heart attack. Led by Yinong Young-Xu, the team found the common link among all those who suffered heart attacks was anxiety.

"Psychological stress, be it depression or anxiety, has been linked to the progression of atherosclerosis, development of atherothrombosis, and increased risk of arrhythmias," Yinong told AFP. "These findings should reinforce to cardiologists a need to attend to the whole patient by paying attention to psychological problems in addition to cardiovascular disease."

Alarming, scientists have concluded that constant stress and anxiety can even affect the rhythm of the heartbeat, heightening the risk of heart disease, reports AFP. Previous research has shown that people who have heart conditions and live in a permanent state of anxiety have twice the chance of suffering a heart attack or dying compared with those who live in a more calm state of being.

A separate study from Central University of Venezuela in Caracas concluded that patients are especially vulnerable if there is a family history of heart attack or sudden death from coronary disease. Sometimes the death of loved ones leaves its emotional scars, and somber events, such as the anniversary of a person's death, can actually lead to heart problems with fatal outcomes--particularly among men. "We've all known close family members who have died within hours, weeks, months or years of each other," lead study author Juan Marques told AFP. "This and previous studies indicate that cardiovascular mortality is affected by the anticipation or experience of psychological factors and symbolic occasions." Both studies were presented to the 57th annual conference of the American College of Cardiology.

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