

# Urban Living and Cardiac Health

The frenzied pace of urban life – processed foods, tight deadlines, juggling work and family life, and crowded commutes – is something many of us have grown accustomed to. In fact, we even declare that we enjoy this rat race!

However, knowingly or unknowingly, these day-to-day stresses may be contributing to an increase in heart diseases. In fact, statistics from the Ministry of Health indicate that 1 in 3 deaths in Singapore is due to heart disease or stroke.

Consultant Cardiologists Drs Reginald Liew and Rohit Khurana believe that some aspects of urban living are major contributors to the rising prevalence of heart diseases here in Singapore, specifically:

- A diet high in salt and fat content
- Stress
- Smoking
- Lack of exercise
- Being overweight

## DIET AND ALCOHOL

While many of us are aware of the importance of a healthy diet, we sometimes neglect to practice good eating habits and succumb to the convenience of pre-cooked and processed foods. If cooking is not an option, do make an effort to select healthier options such as non-fried foods and meals rich in fruits and vegetables. Research has shown that enjoying a glass of wine after a hard day's work can have health benefits; reports in the early 1990s indicated that the wine-drinking French have lower incidences of heart disease, despite their high fat/dairy diets. However, do keep an eye on the number of glasses you are downing. Over-consumption of alcohol can lead to increased blood pressure, obesity and heart rhythm disturbances, which in turn, leads to a higher risk of cardiovascular disease. So, keep track of those 'happy hours'.

## COPING WITH STRESS

While some level of stress propels us to be motivated, more efficient and alert, prolonged levels of stress on the other hand can affect our health, both



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physically and mentally. A certain level of stress is expected in life, and it is not the level of stress we experience but how we manage stress that is more critical. Healthy stress management techniques such as exercise, meditation and even having someone to talk to, can help us navigate life's stresses. Negative coping techniques like emotional eating, smoking and drinking, on the other hand, can lead to long-term health problems. Smoking for example, not only leads to irregular heartbeats, but also the narrowing of blood vessels. Conversely, exercise helps to keep your weight in check and improves the cholesterol ratio.

## HIGH RISK AND THE WARNING SIGNS

Even with the best of efforts: maintaining a healthy diet, keeping stress at bay and avoiding smoking and alcohol, some of us may be more at risk of having heart diseases than others. This could be due to an underlying heart muscle disease or heart rhythm condition, which can cause sudden collapse and death. So, who are at risk and what signs should we look out for?

**It is also worth noting that women may not display the classical symptoms of a heart attack, and thus may not even know that they are experiencing one.**

### THOSE AT RISK OF HEART DISEASES

- Overweight individuals
- Smokers
- Having a family history of heart diseases, regardless of age
- Excessive drinkers / alcoholics
- Physically inactive (sedentary lifestyle)
- Males over 40 years of age
- Females over 45 years of age

### WARNING SIGNS

- Chest pains which can occur with nausea or sweating
- Dizziness
- Palpitations
- Shortness of breath that is disproportionate to activity
- Pains in the upper abdomen

## HEART DISEASES AND FEMALES

It is a myth that heart disease is a 'male-dominated' disease. In fact, cardiovascular disease is the highest cause of death amongst women worldwide. Women who are pregnant, menopausal or taking oral contraceptives are at higher risk. It is also worth noting that women may not display the classical symptoms of a heart attack, and thus may not even know that they are experiencing one. Dr Khurana cites the case of a lady who came into the A&E department of Gleneagles Hospital experiencing upper back pain, neck ache and sweat.

"The patient was surprised when she was told that she was experiencing a heart attack; she did not experience any chest pain", said Dr Khurana. "It was fortunate that she came into the hospital promptly as in a heart attack, every second counts and you lose heart muscle by the second", Dr Liew added.

## TAKING CARE OF YOUR HEART

What should you do to ensure that your heart is taken care of? "Go for regular screening," advised Dr Liew. "With the advancements in medical science and technology, doctors are better able to detect diseases at an early stage and limit progression." This is especially critical for those who are at risk or have experienced symptoms. "Do not ignore the signs. With today's stressful lifestyle, its easy to dismiss symptoms as fatigue or indigestion, hoping that they will disappear," Dr Khurana advised. "Seeking advice early can save your life."

Call us and get a specialist appointment within 24 hours.

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