

Adventist Healthcare: Health Tip of the Week

Broken Heart Syndrome

Broken heart syndrome (stress cardiomyopathy) will account for some of the seven million heart attacks that occur in the U.S. each year.

* Although the syndrome has been around for decades, researchers contend that it likely occurs more frequently than doctors realize.

* A February report in *The New England Journal of Medicine* is the first to identify the condition in the U.S. According to a cardiologist from UNC who is also a spokesperson for the American Heart Association, the study solidifies the link between emotions and the heart.

Description

Researchers at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine have discovered that sudden emotional stress (such as news of a death or car accident) can result in severe but reversible heart muscle weakness that mimics a classic heart attack.

* Often misdiagnosed, broken heart syndrome is a day-long surge of catecholamines (adrenalin, noradrenalin, and stress-related proteins such as cortisol) into the blood stream that are produced by an excited nervous system. It is important doctors recognize the syndrome so medical teams avoid invasive procedures.

Symptoms

* The chemicals released can be temporarily toxic to the heart, stunning the muscle. Symptoms similar to a heart attack are produced, including chest pain, fluid in the lungs, shortness of breath, and heart failure.

* There are no blockages in the arteries supplying the heart. Also, there are no elevated levels of cardiac enzymes released into the blood stream from a damaged heart muscle.

* Those with broken heart syndrome do not suffer irreversible muscle damage and recovery rates are much faster than typically seen after a heart attack. Patients show a dramatic improvement within a few days with a complete recovery within two weeks.

* Initial levels of catecholamines are two-three times higher than in patients with classic heart attacks. Also, those suffering with broken heart syndrome can have catecholamines as high as 34 times the normal level.

Those at Risk

* Mostly middle-aged or elderly women

* Mainly healthy women with few risk factors for heart disease.

Researchers caution that even a stress-induced heart attack can't go untreated. There may be underlying heart disease that must be addressed. If the symptoms of broken heart syndrome are severe enough, they must be dealt with quickly.

Sources: NIH, Johns Hopkins Medicine, USA Today and Washington and Shady Grove Adventist Hospitals. The Health Tip of the Week is for educational purposes only. For additional information, consult your physician. Please feel free to copy and distribute this health resource.