



Harris County Hospital District

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MEDIA RELEASE

Don't Stress the Holidays – Your Heart Will Thank You

HOUSTON (Dec. 6, 2006) – It's the most wonderful time of the year ... at least, it's supposed to be. Some people find the holidays more stressful than enjoyable. But did you know stressing over the 10 uninvited holiday guests and the never-ending holiday shopping could be affecting your heart?

Stress is one of the risk factors for heart disease and heart attacks. A study in the journal *Circulation* suggested that holiday stress and overindulgence can help explain the soaring rate of fatal heart attacks in December and January.

“An increase in an adrenaline surge can lead to a fast heart rate and increased blood pressure, which may increase the demand on the heart. Patients with known heart diseases are especially prone, as their hearts will not be able to increase blood supply to meet the increased demand,” said Dr. Nasser Lakkis, chief of cardiology at Ben Taub General Hospital and associate professor at Baylor College of Medicine. “Additionally, stress may activate platelets, which make patients more prone to form clots in their arteries.”

Another potential detrimental effect of stress on the heart is spasm of the coronary arteries, which may lead to a significant shortage in blood supply to the heart muscle.

Severe stress can cause the heart to beat more quickly, increasing blood flow through vessels that may already be narrowed by plaque. The plaque buildup can cause a blood clot, resulting in a heart attack. High levels of stress hormone can also knock the heartbeat out of its natural rhythm and may have serious consequences, including sudden cardiac death.

While too much food and family tension can take a toll on your heart health, Lakkis offered some tips to help maintain a healthy heart this holiday season. “Get organized and set priorities – you don't have to do everything at once,” he said. “Also, limit your smoking and drinking, and keep active by exercising.”

As always, be aware of heart attack symptoms such as chest pain or pressure, discomfort in other areas of the upper body such as arms, neck, jaw or back, shortness of breath, lightheadedness and nausea. If you or anyone around you experiences these symptoms, call 9-1-1 immediately.

“The holidays aren't supposed to be a burden,” Lakkis said. “Take time out to relax and enjoy them.”

The Harris County Hospital District is the public health care system for the nation's third most populous county. It provides more than 1.1 million health care visits each year to uninsured and underinsured residents of Harris County. The district operates Ben Taub General Hospital, Lyndon B. Johnson General Hospital, Quentin Mease Community Hospital, 12 community health centers, a dental center, eight school-based clinics, 13 homeless shelter clinics and four mobile health units.

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