Holiday Stress and Your Heart
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The heart and blood vessels are particularly sensitive to acute and chronic stress. With every beat, the heart not only pumps blood, but transmits complex patterns of neurological, hormonal, pressure and electromagnetic information to the brain and throughout the body. The heart is uniquely positioned as a powerful communication hub that connects the body, mind, emotions, and spirit. Research suggests that there is an elaborate feedback network of hormones, chemicals and nerves that exist between the brain, the heart and centers of thoughts and emotions. The heart sends the brain messages that affect our perceptions, our mental processing and our feelings. It’s no surprise then that there is a strong StressHealth cardiovascular disease connection.

Did you know more people die of heart disease on Christmas than any other day of the year?
According to AHA, nearly 2,400 Americans die of CVD each day, an average of one death every 36 seconds. But, there are more deaths on Christmas and New Years than any other single day of the year. These are called ‘excess’ deaths. The study reported in 2004 –article available at [http://weber.ucsd.edu/~dphillip/circulation_journal_holiday_heart_final_print_version.pdf] Cardiac Mortality is Higher around Christmas and New Year’s than any other time: The Holidays as a risk factor for death. David P. Phillips, PhD. He described discrete peaks around Christmas and new years “Christmas Coronary” Syndrome. Specifically there are 5% more cardiac death on Dec 25, 26 and Jan1st.

Why are the holidays a risk factor for death?
There are four proposed mechanisms or paths that cause heart problems.

1. Changes in Diet and alcohol
   * Alcohol has direct toxic effect on the heart—“holiday Heart” – Arial fibrillation
2. Respiratory Diseases and the environment make you more vulnerable.

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• Fireplaces- environmental toxins (particulate pollution is higher in winter)
• Bronchitis, ‘colds’, pneumonia
• Co morbid factors.....CHF, COPD

3. Holiday Induced Delay in seeking care
4. EMOTIONAL STRESS (see below)

How does acute emotional Stress cause Heart Problems?
Around the holidays its easy to be stressed; Relatives, Financial pressures, Entertaining, Gifts, travel or an anniversary reaction.
Here is how that stress you are feeling may translate into heart problems. There are three mechanisms.

1. ‘Stunning’ of Heart muscle-- weakening--of the heart cause sudden yet reversible heart failure called stress cardiomyopathy (Takosubo’s Syndrome described in 2005). This is not common but does occur. More often in women than men.
2. Abnormal Changes on blood flow in the heart.
   For some reason with stress there is decreased blood flow to the heart --- which is abnormal. Usually with acute physical stress - like working out-- there is increased blood flow to heart. This paradoxical change makes at risk people who have that extra stress during the holidays more prone to angina and heart attacks.
3. Abnormal heart rhythms---namely ventricular fibrillation. We know that what puts you at risk includes; Anger, hostility and anxiety

What steps can you take to avoid heart problems during the holidays for your or your family members?

1. If you have high blood pressure, coronary disease, heart failure=
   a. Take your medicines...don’t forget. Pack them NOW in your carryon bags...carry a copy of your EKG
   b. Follow your usual self care routine when you get to the hotel or your family member’s home. Its okay.
2. Moderate the Alcohol
3. Avoid known triggers—
   a. Excess Physical exertion (shoveling snow, etc)
   b. Overeating
   c. lack of sleep
   d. emotional stress
   e. illegal drugs
   f. Anger
4. Don’t Delay: if you feel you need to seek medical care...don’t take a chance
5. Get your flu shot if you are at risk for cardiac compromise due to respiratory infections

Remember the reason for the season and enjoy!