



## **A guide to a healthy heart and longer life**

**KUALA LUMPUR:** According to data released by the national statistics department last year, heart disease remains the number one killer of Malaysians. In 2019 alone, 15% of medically certified deaths were caused by heart disease, claiming a total of 16,325 victims.

Awareness is key to combating the disease, and World Heart Day, which falls annually on Sept 29, is dedicated to educating people worldwide on the matter.

Dr Iskandar Mirza, clinical fellow in cardiology at the National Heart Institute (IJN), says while it is encouraging that most Malaysians are aware of the dangers of heart disease, much remains to be done to combat it effectively.

“The biggest problem is the average Malaysian lifestyle,” he tells FMT. “We eat lots of rice and don’t have proper balanced diets.”

Overconsumption of rice can lead to diabetes as well as obesity, and people with these medical conditions are more predisposed to heart problems, he says.

Smoking also greatly increases a person’s risk, with studies suggesting that those who partake of cigarettes are four times more vulnerable to heart disease.

And while older people are more at risk, young people could experience other conditions such as arrhythmia (uneven heartbeat).

Iskandar adds that younger women are statistically less likely to suffer from heart attacks, but upon reaching menopause, their risk is equal to that of men’s.

## **How heart attacks occur**

“When a blood vessel is injured, the first thing that seals off the injury is fat. These fat deposits may start to accumulate and form a plaque layer,” Iskandar explains.

As that particular vessel takes more damage, the layer of plaque grows thicker and starts to block the passage, eventually leading to a rupture and heart attack.

A patient’s chances of survival depend on how severe the blockage is and how quickly they receive medical attention.

## **Signs and symptoms**

According to Iskandar, chest pain is the most common symptom of a heart attack. "It's not a prickling or burning sensation. It feels like someone's sitting on your chest, and it usually comes with nausea, sweating and vomiting," he says.

Heart attacks can happen anytime and anywhere, though they are more likely to strike when the heart is under pressure, such as during exercise.

"An unhealthy heart is like a time bomb," says Iskandar. "We don't know when a heart attack will happen. It all depends on how severe the blockage is."

If you witness someone suffering from a heart attack, your first priority is to call an ambulance.

After being stabilised by first responders, the patient's blood vessels will be examined by doctors via a catheter meant to locate the vessel responsible for the heart attack. The doctors can then operate to unblock the affected vessel.

The speed with which the patient is brought to the hospital will decide how normal their life will be after the attack.

"Timing is everything," says Iskandar. "For every minute that passes without medical attention, one cardiac muscle will die."

A patient brought in late will have a severely weakened heart and will be highly discouraged from participating in physically demanding activities afterwards.

Those who escape relatively unscathed the first time around must still be cautious as a second heart attack is a strong possibility. Drastic lifestyle changes are often recommended, such as losing weight, controlling blood pressure, watching one's sugar intake, and diligently taking heart medication.

### **The Covid factor**

With the pandemic still raging on, one would do well to take extra precautions as Covid-19 can apparently increase the risk of contracting heart disease. According to Iskandar, IJN has seen an influx of patients with heart problems after having contracted Covid.

"The virus can go into the heart muscles and cause a condition called myocarditis inflammation," he reveals.

Contracting Covid-19 could also result in injured blood vessels, leading to more blockages and clots that would lead to further health problems.

So what measures can Malaysians take to keep their hearts healthy?

Again, "control your diet, blood pressure and blood sugar", Iskandar advises. "If you are obese, reduce your body weight. Losing 1kg is enough to noticeably reduce your blood pressure."

Knowledge of one's family medical history is also important, and if you are a chronic smoker, now would be a good time to kick the habit.

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