

Protect your heart before trouble strikes

The hidden risks to heart health in Bangladesh and steps to address them



SEAN TAYLOR

Heart disease can develop quietly, long before a person feels unwell. In Bangladesh, many people live with high blood pressure, diabetes or raised cholesterol without knowing it. By the time these conditions are detected, they may already have contributed to a heart attack or stroke.

World Heart Day, observed on September 29, reminds us that protecting the heart begins before symptoms appear. Regular checks, practical lifestyle changes and accessible treatment can help prevent avoidable illness and deaths.

High blood pressure is a concern. According to the World Heart Federation, around 28 percent of adults in Bangladesh have hypertension. Yet feeling well can create false reassurance: the condition often causes no obvious symptoms while damaging blood vessels.

Bangladesh has shown that better care can make a difference. Since its launch in 2018, the Bangladesh Hypertension Control Initiative has strengthened services and medicine availability, helping more people receive treatment and bring their blood pressure under control. These gains need to reach everyone who requires care.

Daily surroundings also shape cardiovascular risk. Tobacco smoke and air pollution damage blood vessels and promote inflammation. Diets high in salt, unhealthy fats and refined carbohydrates add to the burden. Average daily salt consumption in Bangladesh is approximately 10 grams, roughly twice the World Health Organisation's recommended maximum.

Meanwhile, urbanisation is changing how people work and travel. Walking, cycling and physically demanding everyday tasks may give way to more sedentary routines. Safe places to walk and cleaner air are therefore essential parts of prevention.

THERE ARE FIVE PRACTICAL STEPS PEOPLE CAN TAKE.

First, know your numbers. Have your blood pressure checked and discuss blood glucose and cholesterol testing with a healthcare professional. Detecting a problem early creates an opportunity to act before complications develop.

Second, avoid tobacco in all forms and exposure to second-hand smoke. Quitting can be difficult; support from healthcare professionals, family and friends can help people make and sustain this change.

Third, make manageable changes to meals. Use less salt in cooking, limit heavily fried and processed foods, and include more vegetables, fruit and pulses. A healthier eating pattern that lasts is more useful than a restrictive diet that is abandoned.

Fourth, build movement into daily life. Adults should aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity each week. Brisk walking and cycling are useful options. Where possible, choose routes and times with less air pollution.

Fifth, follow prescribed treatment even when you feel well. Take chest pain, sudden breathlessness, facial drooping, arm weakness or difficulty speaking seriously and seek urgent medical help.

Individual effort needs public support. Affordable medicines, reliable primary care, tobacco control, healthier food and action on air pollution make healthy choices more achievable. Bangladesh has policies to build on; their value depends on consistent implementation.

The World Heart Federation's *"Don't Miss a Beat"* campaign encourages people to recognise risks and calls for stronger action from decision-makers. That message must extend beyond a single day. Protecting hearts requires everyday habits and a health system that helps people sustain them.

The writer is the Director of Science and Public Health at the World Heart Federation.

BLOOD PRESSURE, SUGAR, CHOLESTEROL

Three numbers that could save your life

Knowing a few basic health numbers – blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol – could help identify serious disease before complications develop, European health experts have urged.

The call came during the first-ever EU Screening Week, launched on World Heart Day at the European Association for the Study of Diabetes annual meeting in Milan. Under the banner *"Know Your Numbers"*, the initiative encourages people to check key cardiometabolic indicators and take preventive action earlier.

Experts from the European Society of Cardiology, European Association for the Study of Diabetes and European Association for the Study of Obesity stressed that cardiovascular disease, diabetes and obesity are closely interconnected and often remain undetected until symptoms or complications develop.

The message is highly relevant for Bangladesh. The International Diabetes Federation estimates that about 13.9 million Bangladeshi adults aged 20–79 were living with diabetes in 2024, with around 39 percent undiagnosed.

Hypertension is another major concern. the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that 28 percent of Bangladeshi adults aged 30–79 have hypertension, while only about 16 percent have it under control.

Regular checks of blood pressure, blood glucose, cholesterol, weight and waist circumference can therefore provide an important opportunity for earlier diagnosis and preventive care.



The next pandemic cannot wait for another promise. Are we ready?



DR TAREQ SALAHUDDIN

World leaders have renewed their pledge to strengthen pandemic preparedness, with implications for Bangladesh: detecting outbreaks early and ensuring access to vaccines and treatment must remain priorities between emergencies.

At the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA 81)'s second high-level meeting on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response on September 25, leaders called for sustained investment, stronger health systems and fairer access to medical tools, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

They recognised progress through the WHO Pandemic Agreement and amendments to the International Health Regulations. However, a crucial part of the agreement remains unfinished.

Countries are negotiating a Pathogen Access and Benefit-Sharing system, intended to link the sharing of pathogens with pandemic potential to equitable access to vaccines, medicines and diagnostics developed from them. WHO says adoption of the annex in May 2027 is necessary before countries can begin considering ratification of the agreement.

For Bangladesh, the relevance extends beyond COVID-19. Nipah virus infections have been reported almost every year since 2001, illustrating why threats emerging at the intersection of human, animal and environmental health require constant attention.

In February 2026, WHO reported a fatal Nipah case in Naogaon. The patient had consumed raw date palm sap. Authorities investigated the outbreak and traced contacts; no additional cases had been identified as of February 3. WHO assessed the overall risk as low at that time.

Bangladesh has foundations to build on. WHO identifies hospital-based Nipah surveillance established in 2006, rapid response teams at national and district levels, and capacity for rapid laboratory testing among its strengths.

These experiences suggest that practical preparedness



means supporting frontline health workers, maintaining dependable testing and reporting systems, and helping communities recognise risks. Coordination across health, livestock and environmental services is essential to the One Health approach highlighted at the UN meeting.

For Bangladeshis, the central issue is whether international commitments translate into timely protection close to home. A suspected infection must trigger investigation, health workers need protection, and communities need clear information they can trust.

The renewed pledge offers an opportunity to strengthen those everyday systems. Its success will depend on sustained funding and implementation before the next emergency arrives.

E-mail: tareq.salahuddin@thedailystar.net

DID YOU KNOW?

C-section pain can linger for years

Persistent pain after caesarean delivery can disrupt women's daily lives, sleep, mood and even sexual wellbeing for months or years after childbirth, according to a major review published in Anaesthesia.

Researchers analysed 30 studies involving 28,295 women across 22 countries. Chronic postsurgical pain after caesarean delivery was linked with difficulties in general activity, walking, work and sleep, as well as fatigue and poorer mental health.

In the early months after childbirth, more than half of women with chronic pain reported interference with general activity and mood, while 43% said it affected sleep. Some effects persisted at six and 12 months, and chronic pain was also associated with higher rates of depressive symptoms.

The findings are particularly relevant to Bangladesh, where caesarean delivery has become increasingly common. The Bangladesh Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2025 found that 51.8% of women with a recent live birth delivered by caesarean section.

Researchers say post-caesarean care should therefore extend beyond wound healing. Women with persistent pain need early assessment and, where necessary, multidisciplinary support addressing physical function, sleep and psychological wellbeing.



Beyond irregular periods: Understanding PCOS in teens



DR SHAHED IMRAN

Irregular periods, acne, unwanted facial hair and rapid weight gain are often dismissed as ordinary teenage changes. But for some girls, they may signal polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), a hormonal and metabolic condition that can affect health well beyond adolescence.

In Bangladesh, delayed recognition remains a concern because menstrual problems are still difficult for many families to discuss openly. Teenagers may also face teasing or body-shaming over weight gain, acne or excess hair, discouraging them from seeking help.

The condition affects reproductive hormones and can cause irregular or absent periods, excess androgen-related hair growth and acne. It is also associated with metabolic problems and longer-term reproductive risks.

Bangladeshi research highlights the scale of the metabolic burden. In one study involving 175 adolescents with PCOS, 42.3 percent had metabolic syndrome, 90.9 percent had dyslipidaemia and 24 percent showed glucose intolerance. Vitamin D deficiency was also extremely common, affecting 92.6 percent of the participants.

Management should therefore go beyond medicines used to regulate menstruation. Doctors need to consider a teenager's weight, metabolic risks, symptoms and future reproductive health. Regular physical activity, a balanced diet and appropriate weight management remain central to care. Vitamin D deficiency, if present, should be corrected only under medical guidance.

Most importantly, families should treat persistent menstrual irregularity, rapid weight gain or abnormal hair growth as health issues rather than matters of shame. Earlier medical advice can help protect both physical and emotional wellbeing.

The writer is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Child and Mother Health (ICMH), Dhaka. E-mail: ishahed86@gmail.com



