#HEALTH & FITNESS

PROTECTING YOUR HEART: THE ESSENTIAL DOS AND DON'TS

Your heart works around the clock, often without demanding much attention, until something goes wrong. While factors like age, genetics, and pre-existing health conditions play a role in heart health, daily habits can have a significant impact on your cardiovascular well-being. Understanding the essential dos and don'ts of cardiac health can help protect your heart and effectively reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease.

KNOWING YOUR KEY HEALTH NUMBERS

Dr Ashraful-Ur-Rahman, a Medicine Specialist and Cardiologist at the National Institute of Cardiovascular Diseases (NICVD), urges everyone to "know the numbers" when it comes to heart health. He stresses that you cannot manage what you have never measured.

The common tests include a lipid profile, blood sugar, and HbA1c. Moreover, the Body Mass Index (BMI) should be below 25, and blood pressure should be monitored regularly.

Dr Rahman also explains that kidney disease and heart disease are closely linked. Protein in the urine is an early sign of blood vessel damage, especially in individuals with diabetes or high blood pressure.

WHAT YOUR FAMILY HISTORY MEANS

Dr Rahman notes that people should not wait until after 40 to think about this, since heart attacks can occur in young people, and family history is often the reason.

However, "A positive family history does not mean a heart attack is inevitable. It means you should get screened sooner," Dr Rahman adds. Some families carry an inherited form of very high cholesterol, which is why early lipid testing matters in this case as well.



SLEEP, STRESS AND HEART HEALTH

As clichéd as it sounds, around six to seven hours of sleep is essential. But what matters most, Dr Rahman elaborates, is the routine. One bad night does no lasting harm. Weeks and months of short or broken sleep do. Because sleep deprivation disturbs hormones, can push blood pressure up, and can worsen anxiety, it affects the heart indirectly.

HEART ATTACK, ANXIETY OR INDIGESTION: WHAT PERPLEXES MOST PEOPLE

These three are commonly confused, and Dr Rahman's most useful clue is the pattern.

"Heart-related pain, or angina, has a definite pattern linked to exertion. It grows worse when walking or doing heavy work and eases with rest. Pain from anxiety or indigestion, by contrast, tends to come 'anytime, anywhere', with no pattern and non-specific features unrelated to effort," he clarifies.

But most importantly, the pattern is just a guide, not guaranteed evidence. A heart attack can begin at rest and without typical features, especially in people with diabetes. Chest pain that is severe, lasts more than a few minutes, or comes with sweating, breathlessness, nausea, dizziness, or pain spreading to the arm, neck, or jaw needs emergency care immediately.

HOW SIGNIFICANT IS HITTING THE GYM?

Many people think that exercising for heart health requires joining a gym, purchasing equipment, or following a structured workout plan. But several studies suggest otherwise. While a gym can be a convenient option, it is not necessary. Any activity that raises your heart rate and is performed regularly can provide heart benefits.

Moreover, moving your body throughout the day is much more beneficial than an hour of intense gym workouts followed by remaining still for the rest of the day.

Taking care of your heart does not have to involve drastic changes overnight. Instead, focus on consistent and sustainable habits. Eating a balanced diet, staying physically active, managing stress, getting enough sleep, and monitoring notable health indicators can all lead to significant improvements over time.

This article is for general education and is not a substitute for personal medical advice. Please consult a cardiologist about your own risk.

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Photo: Collected

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Is depression contagious?

What psychotherapists want you to know

Moods and stress can quickly spread between close partners, but feeling low after supporting a friend isn't always clinical depression. Experts break down the fine line between temporary emotional contagion and a serious mental health condition

We often think of depression as a deeply personal struggle, something that exists within the mind of the person experiencing it. But what happens when someone close to us is depressed? Can their sadness, hopelessness, and emotional exhaustion begin affecting us too? While depression itself is not an infectious disease, the emotions surrounding it can influence people who share a close relationship with someone experiencing depression.

In a recent interview with psychotherapist Abdul Hamid of the Monobikash Foundation, he explained that depression can be emotionally contagious. "When someone very close to us is depressed, we may end up carrying their emotions," he explains. In some situations, this emotional impact can extend beyond one person and affect an entire group.

However, feeling low after witnessing someone else's suffering does not automatically mean that a person has depression. Hamid explains that if someone experiences deep sadness, emptiness, or loss of interest for 14 days or more, and these feelings significantly interfere with everyday activities, relationships, and lifestyle, it may indicate depression. The distinction between temporary emotional distress and clinical depression therefore remains important.



THE EMOTIONAL WEIGHT OF CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

The impact can become particularly significant when the relationship is emotionally close. A partner, family member, close friend or caregiver may spend considerable time listening to the depressed person's struggles and witnessing their difficulties. Over time, this constant exposure can create emotional exhaustion. The caregiver may begin feeling helpless, hopeless or overwhelmed, especially when they feel responsible for helping the other person recover.

This does not mean that we should become emotionally detached from someone who is suffering. In fact, empathy remains essential. "We cannot become robots," Hamid says. We need to understand another person's pain and respond with compassion, but there is a difference between feeling someone's emotion and making that emotion our own. The goal is to remain empathetic without taking ownership of another person's suffering.

That is where healthy emotional boundaries become important. If someone else's depression is beginning to affect our own emotional wellbeing, we need to recognise the change and establish boundaries. Hamid suggests that we can listen and remain supportive without allowing the other person's emotional state to completely take over our own. If necessary, maintaining some distance while continuing to show empathy can also be healthy.

For caregivers, this distinction becomes even more important. Hamid compares emotional well-being with physical health: just as we do not physically take another person's illness into our own body, we should not carry their emotional problems as our own. Caregivers need to remain conscious of their own emotional state and watch for signs that they are mirroring the depressed person's feelings.

WHEN PROFESSIONAL HELP IS NEEDED

So, what should someone do when a close person's depression begins affecting them? Hamid suggests first paying attention to whether the person's suffering appears to have reached a clinical level. Sometimes, an accident, traumatic event or difficult experience can deeply affect someone and create significant emotional distress. Instead of trying to personally solve the person's depression, suggesting professional help may be a more appropriate response.

Trying to become someone's personal therapist can also create another problem: judgment. When we desperately want to help someone, we may start giving unsolicited advice, comparing their experience with ours or telling them what they should do. Even when our intentions are good, such responses can make a depressed person feel misunderstood. Professional support can provide a safer and more appropriate space for addressing serious psychological difficulties.