

## HEALTH WATCH | Medics warn of rise in cases of heart attacks

**Lifestyle change:** To stay safe, experts say there is need to abandon unhealthy eating and sedentary lives

# Are you setting yourself up for a heart attack?

By JOY WANJA MURAYA

Prisca Outa was fine the whole day. She went to work, came back home, ate her dinner, then she collapsed and was rushed to hospital. Efforts to resuscitate her failed and she was pronounced dead. It's called 'sudden' death. And when post-mortem results came, the culprit is 'heart attack'.

This script is increasingly becoming common and doctors are concerned. Apparently, most deaths from this condition are never recorded.

Dr Simon Mwangi, a general physician who has more than 20 years experience sees at least 14 patients with high blood pressure in a week compared to the early 1990s when he began his practice.

"I have noticed that there is a significant rise in cases of heart attack compared to 1989, when I began practice as a doctor. That time, I would handle, at most, one patient or none in a week, but now it is different," says the medic.

He attributes the growing number of heart attacks to an increase in high blood pressure cases across Kenya.

According to medical experts, there are a number of factors that predispose one to heart attack. The number one risk factor is, however, high blood pressure for heart attack. High blood pressure is when the blood pressure in your arteries is elevated and your heart has to work harder than normal to pump blood through the blood vessels.

So what exactly happens during a heart attack?

Heart attack occurs when a build-up of fatty deposits block blood vessels that supply the heart or the brain (coronary arteries), causing what is medically referred to as coronary heart disease.

This is how it happens medically. The heart muscle requires a constant supply of oxygen-rich blood to nourish it. The coronary arteries provide the heart with this critical blood supply. If you have coronary artery disease, those arteries become narrow and blood cannot flow through them smoothly.

Coronary heart disease is caused by a variety of lifestyle-triggered factors like smoking, a high fat diet, high cholesterol, high blood pressure and obesity.

### MENTORS YOUTH

At the onset of a heart attack, what happens is that either fat, calcium, proteins, and inflammatory cells have built up within the arteries to form plaques of different sizes. The plaque deposits are hard on the outside and soft and mushy on the inside. When the plaque is hard, the outer shell cracks, platelets (disc-shaped particles in the blood that aid clotting) come to the area, and blood clots form around the plaque. If a blood clot totally blocks the artery, the heart muscle becomes 'starved' of oxygen. Within a short time, death of heart muscle cells occurs, causing permanent damage. That is a heart attack. The human heart is about the size of one's fist yet the strongest muscle in the body measuring about



200 to 425 grams. It's so critical that it never sleeps.

Worryingly, changing lifestyles have put the organ under immense pressure. Shift from active to sedentary lifestyles and consumption of fatty foods contributes to heart attacks.

"A good number of people have embraced sedentary lifestyle where it's all about driving everywhere and eating unhealthy. There is need for a total lifestyle change in the general population otherwise it will be a crisis," Dr Mwangi notes. Interestingly, men are more at risk of heart attack due to higher rates of excessive alcohol consumption, obesity and the fact that they do not know how to cope with stress compared to women.

Studies show that each extra serving of fruit and vegetable on your plate daily reduces your chances of dying from heart disease by four per cent.

There is need for correct balance of healthy and unhealthy fats, which is critical for the well-being of the heart. One needs to keep away from unhealthy fatty meats, salty and sweet snacks and processed foods. Unfortunately, these 'sweet and salty poisons' are more popular especially with young and urbane populations.

Aga Khan University Hospital Interventional cardiologist Harun Otieno, says the most ideal time to

seek medical attention in the event of a heart attack is within five minutes if you live next to a hospital but 30 minutes is also an acceptable goal. "In many instances, patients wait more than 12 to 26 hours before going to hospital with symptoms mistakenly believing that the pain will subside," Dr Otieno warns.

"Time is muscle! Time is life! Delays in treatment can lead to death, every minute matters."

According to Dr Otieno, highly sensitive blood tests can also diagnose even small heart attacks besides tests like the ECG.

Dr Otieno calls for vigilance when complaints of chest pain are reported because it is the leading symptom for heart attacks. Patients often describe it as heaviness or an elephant sitting on the chest for more than 30 minutes.

On treatment, Dr Otieno hails advances in modern medicine where technology has allowed access to the heart arteries through minimally invasive techniques from the wrist, painlessly while the patient is awake. "Successfully treated angioplasty patients can be discharged from hospital in three to five days if no complications arise," he says.

And by the way, did you also know that Monday is the day of the week when the risk of heart attack is greatest? Blame it on Monday blues.

## Ten heart disease terms

### 1. Cardiac arrest

When the heart stops beating suddenly and respiration (breathing) and other body functions stop as a result.

### 2. Myocardial infarction

It is the damage and death of heart muscle from the sudden blockage of a coronary artery by a blood clot. The two terms are derived from the word 'myocardium' which is the middle and thickest layer of the heart whereas an infarction refers to the death of a muscle due to lack of oxygen-rich blood.

### 3. Heart attack

Permanent damage to the heart muscle caused by a lack of blood supply to the heart for an extended time period. The severity of damage varies from normal to mild to severe.

### 4. Arteries

Blood vessels that carry blood away from the heart.

### 5. Heart failure

A condition where the heart muscle weakens and cannot pump blood efficiently. Fluid accumulates in the lungs, hands, ankles, or other parts of the body.

### 6. Anticoagulant or blood thinner

A medication that prevents blood from clotting; used for people at risk for stroke or blood clots.

### 7. Hypertension

Same as high blood pressure.

### 8. Coronary Artery Disease (atherosclerosis)

A build-up of fatty material in the wall of the coronary artery that causes significant narrowing of the vessel.

### 9. Antihypertensive

A medication used to treat high blood pressure.

### 10. Angina

It is discomfort or pressure, usually in the chest, caused by a temporarily inadequate blood supply to the heart muscle.

## Photo exhibition documents 30 years of HIV

By KIUNDU WAWERU

In January 1985, Kenyans woke up to this screaming headline, 'Killer Sex Disease in Kenya'. Three days later, another headline shouted, 'Horror Sex Disease in Kakamega'. With the first case of HIV having been discovered in 1984, Kenya was facing heightened fear because there was scanty information on a virus considered lethal.

Such alarmist headlines fueled stigma even more making those infected and affected recoil in silence and fear. Fast forward to 30 years later and there is significant progress in the fight against the scourge. To mark this remarkable journey, the National Museum of Kenya is holding a one-month photographic exhibition that ends December 21. The exhibition which coincides with the World Aids Day goes back to February this year, when Internews in Kenya invited renowned National Geographic photographers to capture the journey. Fifteen Kenyan journalists were selected and sent to Kisii, one of the counties with a high HIV prevalence, to trace the journey of survivors.

After intense training on photography, each

journalist was linked with a person living with HIV or someone working on a project touching on HIV and AIDS, to highlight their story. The journalists followed their subjects for a week, documenting their daily struggles and triumphs. These are the images to be featured at the grand exhibition.

The exhibition, a partnership with the National Aids Control Council and launched by Director of Medical Services, Dr Nicholas Muraguri, features inspiring stories of persons living with the virus.

Unlike many years back when HIV was a death sentence, now thanks to anti-retroviral drugs and massive public awareness campaigns, infected persons can live wholesome lives and participate in nation building.

Some of the works include an assignment by The Standard's photographer David Njaaga. Njaaga followed David Marube, 45, in the school he started in Nyumue village to help educate children orphaned by HIV. Through his school, he has empowered orphans and helped reduce stigma.

Another journalist, Monicah Njeri of The Star, followed a 25-year-old, wheelchair bound Edna

Mogiti whose parents died of HIV living her in the care of her grandparents. The grandmother also died and now Mogiti lives with her 82-year-old grandfather, a peasant.

A kind neighbour, Rose Kinyanya has taken the responsibility of taking care of Mogiti. Njeri stayed with the family for a week, and captured heartrending images and an equally moving story.

This writer was tasked with a story from Nyamira County where a charismatic pastor claims to be healing HIV. Some of his faithful swear to have been healed of HIV and their testimonies have seen people flock to this church. The writer spent a week at Pastor Kennedy Changamu's Immanuel Church and documented his colourful life.

During the launch of the exhibition at the National Museum auditorium, Muraguri, flanked by Nduku Kilonzo, the director NACC, appreciated the journalistic depth in the images and the stories.

Internews also has a digital platform – [internewskenya.org](http://internewskenya.org) – where all the photos from the exhibition plus more can be viewed.



Director of Medical Services Dr Nicholas Muraguri and the National Aids Control Council Director Dr Nduku Kilonzo, during the launch of the exhibition. (PHOTO: DAVID NJAAGA/STANDARD)