

Carrie Fisher and Heart Attacks, or Medical Events Amid Holiday Travel



By *Jamie Wells, M.D.* — December 27, 2016



Credit: Shutterstock [1]

Carrie Fisher's tragic death after last week's inflight medical emergency is sadly an all too familiar occurrence. In fact, [upticks of cardiac-related deaths on Christmas and New Year's](#) [2], in particular, are well-documented.

This is often referred to as the "holiday effect" with the 'why' being unknown and most elusive, but speculated to range from any or a combination of the following: abrupt behavioral changes albeit dietary, alcohol, exercise, work or vacation-induced, stress secondary to travel itself or familial discord or preparations, financial issues, capacity for displacement of death, delayed access to medical care due to remote locations, being en route or a desire not to be an inconvenience, change of routine especially if forget or postpone regular medications or necessary doctor visits, dismissing signs, less experienced medical personnel staffing emergent care facilities and so on...

The litany to the etiology (aka cause) of a medical crisis or issue can be highly variable and each of us is the greatest limiting factor. Our individual lifestyle, medical history and family history, to name a few, contribute to the severity, onset and outcome. Then, there are simply the unexpected, accidental components well beyond our control. The things that just happen--that we won't or can't change no matter how much we try.

Given that this incredibly talented woman shared so much creativity with the world along with invaluable and informative insights into her own health challenges and personal struggles, let's utilize this opportunity to educate ourselves about ways to minimize stress and improve our travel health and safety whenever possible focusing on the things actually within our control.

International Travel...

When flying internationally, it is always optimal to review the [Center for Disease Control's \(CDC\) traveler's health](#) [3] recommendations. By selecting your destination at the previous link, you will learn about important vaccinations to receive before your trip, environmental concerns or health threats, if any, endemic to your travel area detailing modes of prevention. Printing this out and consulting with your physician—and your child's pediatrician as well if apropos— who knows your specific health status is advisable. Doing so in a timely fashion is ideal given certain prophylactic medicines or immunizations require a head start to get the most beneficial response. It is not uncommon to need to see a travel medicine specialist or seek out information from your local health department, so the earlier the better when planning a trip.

These avenues will also provide guidance as to the necessity of obtaining traveler's health insurance, what to include in your first aid kit, how to seek medical care in the event of an emergency, along with basic infection control measures and wound care. The [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) [4] and CDC offer excellent tips on food and water safety in general and world wide. Forgoing unwanted infection will make for a much more pleasant and memorable journey.

Flying, in general, along with acute and chronic stress...

Flying can be stressful for many, so employ techniques that reduce this burden for you and your family. For some, that may mean arriving well in advance of the flight so as not to be stressed about being on time or checking in at home, for example. The lower your stress level on a protracted basis, the better this will serve your overall health and well-being.

Stay adequately hydrated as this mode of travel can be dehydrating. Also, the risk of forming blood clots increases with greater flight duration— so, be sure to stand up and walk around often. To further understand the risks of jet lag, sleep disturbances, radiation, acute and chronic stress and frequent flying's toll on the body review: [Hillary Clinton vs. Donald Trump: Who's got the stamina?](#) [5]

Climate and Altitude Changes...

Whether domestic or international, know your destination. There are safer ways to ascend high altitudes that protect you from harm. To understand the impact of high altitude illnesses and how to prevent their disruption of your otherwise enjoyable vacation or trip, review these two articles: [At high altitude with Buzz Aldrin](#) [6], [Fly me to the Moon, but hold the Altitude Sickness](#) [7]

Be cognizant of the climate you are entering. For example, the sun is even stronger at certain tropical proximities to the equator and can also be reflected strongly off of the snow in alternate locales. Recognize signs of dehydration and avoid it entirely by remaining well-hydrated and sensibly applying sunscreen to evade sunburn while using adequate eye protection (Check out: [Tanorexia? The latest skinny on Melanoma?](#) ^[8]).

The impact of the aforementioned is significantly influenced by your place of residence and baseline lifestyle. Yes, sun in moderation can provide Vitamin D which is a good thing, but it is very important to know your personal and destination's limits and expose yourself responsibly. Another discussion that is best had with your regular physician as well as your child's doctor.

Medical Events and Symptoms of Illness...

Seek early competent medical care when symptoms arise— this is your best bet against disease progression. To delay is how the cascade of negative effects often gets initiated. Knowing where and how to do this before your journey will reduce a tremendous amount of worry.

Know your history and, in a perfect world, you will be current with all of your medications and up-to-date with your medical care before you travel. For imminent travel, attempt to fine tune these with a visit to or contact with your doctor before you leave whenever possible. Be sure your prescriptions are filled and current. Carrying a health summary at all times along with your physicians' contact information might be advisable in the context of those with chronic disease— this could streamline your care.

Behavior Changes...

People tend to alter their routine habits rather abruptly when on vacation or traveling. Be aware of the hazards of binge drinking alcohol or sleep deprivation on your health, for example. These changes can cause undue stress especially in those with underlying conditions.

Whether at home or traveling, avoiding smoking, drugs and alcohol, finding support and connecting socially, eating a well-balanced diet, maintaining a normal routine, getting plenty of sleep and staying active with exercise, hobbies and relaxation techniques are in your best interest. A sense of humor is definitely a bonus to stress reduction as is an upbeat attitude and outlook: [Pessimism Kills...Slowly](#) ^[9].

Heart Attacks and Cardiac-related events...

In the wake of the devastating news of Fisher's death, the [American Heart Association released a statement on the early warning signs for heart attack](#) ^[10]. Review these signs and symptoms as they can differ between genders and people, in general. Expedite the pursuit of medical care if they arise.

Stress ([Don't Go Breaking my heart, Literally!](#) ^[11], [Pessimism Kills...Slowly](#) ^[9]) and [access to high quality care](#)

[12] can certainly influence these events-- this is further detailed in [Upticks of 'Chistmas Coronaries' and 'New Year's Heart Attacks' real? Yes!](#) [2]

[Knowing CPR](#) [13] is another way to arm yourself to help another in need—the sooner the intervention, the better the chance of an effective and superior result.

In summary...

When we can't change what is and so much exists outside of our control, balancing the joy of living with managing what is within our power is the most ideal way to approach the holidays and travel. Prepare where you can as there are no guarantees in life, then just let go and enjoy the wondrous ride.

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Links

[1] <http://www.shutterstock.com>

[2] <http://acsh.org/news/2016/12/26/upticks-christmas-coronaries-and-new-years-heart-attacks-real-yes-10642>

[3] <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/list>

[4] http://www.who.int/foodsafety/publications/consumer/en/travellers_en.pdf?ua=1

[5] <http://www.acsh.org/news/2016/09/30/hillary-clinton-vs-donald-trump%C2%A0who's-got-stamina-10234>

[6] <http://acsh.org/news/2016/12/04/high-altitude-buzz-aldrin-10527>

[7] <http://acsh.org/news/2016/12/06/fly-me-moon-hold-altitude-sickness-10541>

[8] <http://acsh.org/news/2016/10/31/tanorexia-latest-skinny-melanoma-10369>

[9] <http://acsh.org/news/2016/11/29/pessimism-killsslowly-10491>

[10] http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/HeartAttack/WarningSignsofaHeartAttack/Warning-Signs-of-a-Heart-Attack_UCM_002039_Article.jsp#.WGL1RMaR_FJ

[11] <http://acsh.org/news/2016/10/13/don't-go-breaking-my-heart-literally-10291>

[12] <http://acsh.org/news/2016/11/07/survive-hospital-make-sure-your-heart-stops-weekday-10406>

[13] <http://acsh.org/news/2016/11/16/want-nation-super-heroes-early-cpr-makes-every-second-count-10440>