

Heart Attacks Can Strike Young Adults, So Know the Signs

By ACSH Staff — February 18, 2016



[1] Heart attack via Shutterstock

Chest pressure. Shortness-of-breath. Cold sweats. Individually, these symptoms could be signs of heatstroke, asthma or even the side effects of an emotional outburst. But collectively, they can be misdiagnosed [signs of a heart attack](#) [2] especially if you're someone under 40.

Scientists speculate that silent, undetected disorders of the heart's pumping rhythm, along with [premature heart](#) [3] disease, account for many of the sudden cardiac events (SCE) in younger, seemingly healthy individuals.

Take marathoner [Angela Parker](#) [4] who, at just 22, experienced all of the above mentioned while on a trip through Africa. So young at the time, doctors brushed off her symptoms as the flu. Or [Joseph Collins](#) [5], a teenage baseball player who collapsed 10 years ago while running wind sprints with his high school teammates. His coaches stood silently as they watched the then 14-year old fall to the ground failing to act because they thought his tumble was a result of his workout.

Each survived their own frightening ordeal. But what these two unfortunate cases allude to is compelling evidence that when it comes to SCE, no one is immune.

The Centers for Disease Control reports that [heart disease](#) [6] is the leading cause of death for both [men](#) [7] (especially during the ages 45-54, and 65+) and women (ages 65+). What's more, one in every four deaths are because of it.

Roughly 735,000 Americans experience a heart attack annually irrespective of age. And while most heart attack victims are middle-aged or older the average age for a first-time heart attack is 66 for men and 70 for women those in their 20s and 30s suffer them as well. The [Women's Heart Foundation](#) [8] says that annually 35,000 women under the age of 55 experience a heart attack, and that women are twice as likely as men to die within the first few weeks after being stricken.

There are two different yet equally dangerous underlying causes of heart disease, which can cause a heart attack in both men and women under age 40: Kawasaki disease and hypertrophic cardiomyopathy.

Kawasaki disease

A rare childhood disease, Kawasaki [involves inflammation of the blood vessels](#) [9] such as the arteries, capillaries and veins. Sometimes Kawasaki disease affects the coronary arteries, which carry oxygen-rich blood to the heart. Children who had it, like Ms. Parker, may develop serious heart problems later on. And it was only after her second heart attack at age 24 that doctors were able to pinpoint Kawasaki as the underlying cause.

Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy

[Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy](#) [10] is a common cause of heart attacks in young people, including young athletes, and is usually inherited. Caused by a mutation of the genes in the heart muscles, the condition is characterized by enlarged cardiac muscle cells. This enlargement causes the walls of the ventricles (the heart's "pump") to thicken, which can block the blood flow. The ventricle must then work harder to pump the blood flow making physical activity unsafe, and often this escapes early detection, as in the case with Mr. Collins.

He received a physical one week prior to him collapsing on the field," said Collins' mother, Eva. "And unfortunately they don't do the ECGs and echos, referring to heart checkup testing.

Lastly, [threats to heart health](#) [11] can, of course, also be brought on by lifestyle choices. Smoking is by far and away the biggest threat, which is why it's the behavior that should be corrected first and receive the most attention. Being overweight or obese is another significant factor. Lack of physical activity can also undermine the heart, as can abuse of illegal drugs. And for someone who is diabetic, inattention to this serious condition can also pose a risk to the heart.

And without a doubt, while young adults are stricken with heart attacks far less frequently than older adults, they should be mindful of these symptoms that might signal an oncoming attack: chest pain, shortness of breath, cold sweats, nausea, jaw pain and vomiting.

And while you don't have control over inherited conditions such as Kawasaki disease and Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, you do have control over the lifestyle choices you make. So make good ones.

COPYRIGHT © 1978-2016 BY THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON SCIENCE AND HEALTH

Source URL: <https://www.acsh.org/news/2016/02/18/heart-attacks-can-strike-young-adults-so-know-the-signs>
Links

[1] http://acsh.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/shutterstock_257017855.jpg

[2] http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/HeartAttack/WarningSignsofaHeartAttack/Warning-Signs-of-a-Heart-Attack_UCM_002039_Article.jsp#.VsNKAbkrJz8

[3] <http://www.health.harvard.edu/heart-health/premature-heart-disease>

[4] <https://www.yahoo.com/health/two-heart-attacks-in-my-1361709896122422.html>

- [5] <http://kxan.com/2016/02/05/late-diagnosis-of-heart-disorder-deadly-for-young-athletes/>
- [6] <http://www.cdc.gov/heartdisease/facts.htm>
- [7] <http://www.cdc.gov/men/lcod/2013/allagesmen2013.pdf>
- [8] http://www.womensheart.org/content/heartdisease/heart_disease_facts.asp
- [9] <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/kd>
- [10] http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/More/Cardiomyopathy/Hypertrophic-Cardiomyopathy_UCM_444317_Article.jsp#.VsNEmrkrJz8
- [11] <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/heart-attack/basics/risk-factors/con-20019520>