This Stress-Related Cardiac Problem Increased During the COVID-19 Crisis

Since the start of the pandemic, experts have noted an uptick in cases of an issue known as broken heart syndrome.

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Physical or emotional suffering of any kind can cause people to experience stress cardiomyopathy, a condition that causes heart failure or dysfunction. Now, new findings published in JAMA Network Open suggest that more people have been diagnosed with this health issue, also known as broken heart syndrome, during the coronavirus pandemic, reports the Cleveland Clinic.

For the study, researchers compared 258 patients who visited the Cleveland Clinic and Cleveland Clinic Akron General between March 1 and April 30 with heart symptoms known as acute coronary syndrome (ACS) to four control groups of ACS patients before the pandemic.

Compared with pre-pandemic incidence of the condition, results showed a significant increase (7.8%) in patients diagnosed with broken heart syndrome since the health crisis started.

Findings also revealed that although individuals were more likely to stay in the hospital longer, no major difference in mortality occurred. Furthermore, all patients diagnosed with the condition tested negative for COVID-19.

Some symptoms of stress cardiomyopathy are similar to a heart attack, such as chest pain and shortness of breath, but usually without the coronary arteries undergoing acute blockages. Some other signs include irregular heartbeat, fainting, low blood pressure, enlargement of the heart's left ventricle and the inability of the heart to pump enough blood.

Typically, those with stress cardiomyopathy recover their heart function in several days or weeks. However, the condition can sometimes cause significant cardiac and cerebrovascular adverse events that occasionally prove fatal. Treatment for the problem includes heart medications to lower blood pressure and slow the heart rate. But doctors may also prescribe drugs to help manage stress.

"While the pandemic continues to evolve, self-care during this difficult time is critical to our heart health, and our overall health," said Grant Reed, MD, MSc, director of the Cleveland's Clinic's STEMI (ST-elevation myocardial infarction) program and the study's senior author. "For those who

feel overwhelmed by stress, it’s important to reach out to your health care provider.”

Reed encourages people to exercise, meditate and connect with loved ones, while still maintaining physical distance and safety measures, to help ease anxiety.

For related coverage, read “COVID-19 May Initially Affect the Entire Nervous System.” Click here for more coronavirus coverage.

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