

HEAL

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Never take matters of the heart lightly.

Ignore at your peril

A heart attack may be unexpected, but there are signs to look out for, writes **Meera Murugesan**

GAVIN (not his real name), a 45-year-old man with an active life, has always enjoyed cycling.

During one of his cycling trips with a group of friends, Gavin suddenly experienced chest pain while cycling uphill.

Suspecting something was not right, his friends immediately brought him to the hospital.

Even though he was still conscious, Gavin was actually in the midst of a heart attack. However, given that he was rushed immediately to the hospital, doctors were able to quickly diagnose his condition and save his life.

He was lucky because he had been brought immediately to the hospital at the first sign of a heart attack. Any delay would have cost him his life.

Dr Ernest Ng Wee Oon, who is Pantai Hospital Kuala Lumpur consultant interventional cardiologist and electrophysiologist, says time is of the essence in dealing with a heart attack.

It is vital that one should never ignore the signs that something is not right, he adds.

There are often signs of an impending heart attack such as chest pains, shortness of breath, nausea, dizziness, cold sweat as well as discomfort in the arms, upper abdomen, shoulder, jaw and neck. Almost immediately, the patient would be uncomfortable.

Unless these symptoms are severe or persistent, patients may sometimes confuse them with regular discomfort or a less serious problem. They may assume it's related to tiredness, poor sleep, muscle aches, acid reflux or gastritis, says Dr Ng.

"It's always better to be safe than sorry. When you have a heart attack and you come in late, you've lost that valuable window of opportunity to enable doctors to save you."

What's worrying is some patients may exhibit no symptoms at all. These people have underlying coronary diseases which they are not even aware of.

DEADLY AND DANGEROUS

Heart disease is the top cause of death in Malaysia, adds Dr Ng, citing unhealthy diet and lifestyles as important contributing factors.

All these can lead to the development of diabetes, high blood pressure and high

cholesterol. The impact is significant and may cause premature death leading to the loss of a loved one for family members.

"Many people often delay or dismiss getting a check-up as they feel well."

Men and women over 40 should get themselves screened at least once a year. Those with an increased risk such as individuals with a family history of heart disease or those suffering from diabetes or high blood pressure should get themselves checked more frequently so doctors can monitor their condition.

Regular screening gives doctors an idea of the condition of your heart and it's necessary even if you have no family history of heart disease as the risk increases with age.

Pantai Hospital Kuala Lumpur emergency department head Dr Mohammed Ridzuan Abdul Razak agrees with Dr Ng that time is of the essence in managing and treating a heart attack.

"Basically, you want to get to the hospital as fast as you can, so you must be able to recognise that there is a problem. You need to know the symptoms and what to do if they occur."

Intervention at the heart lab (whether angioplasty or stenting of the blocked heart artery) should be done as soon as possible, preferably within 90 minutes of arrival to ensure a good outcome. Any delay adds to the risk of the patient not surviving the episode.

Dr Mohammed Ridzuan says in the event of an attack, call for an ambulance immediately. If the ambulance is delayed, family members should drive the patient to hospital themselves, he adds.

Try to keep the patient as

calm as possible as any added stress or anxiety will stress the heart.

"Tell them to calm down and take slow, deep breaths. Get them to sit or lie down

if they feel light-headed."

If they have a known heart problem and medication at home which can ease chest discomfort or pain, they should take that medicine while they are being driven to the nearest hospital.

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Dr Ng says the signs of an impending attack should never be ignored.

GET THAT JAB

COVID-19 vaccination is crucial for those with a history of heart disease as data clearly shows that those with the condition are susceptible to complications should they catch the virus.

Dr Ng says once the virus enters the body, it causes direct lung damage, resulting in oxygen levels to fall during the inflammatory process.

This may cause blood pressure to drop and when this happens, the heart is under stress because it has to pump faster and harder. If the patient has underlying heart disease, this puts undue stress on the heart and could cause the patient's overall condition to be more severe.

"The vaccine is important

because it allows an individual to develop antibodies which help reduce infection and severity of the disease.

"Reports of serious side effects are rare."

Many patients with heart disease are concerned about getting the vaccine, but Dr Ng assures them that it is safe and that it offers them crucial protection.

Dr Mohammed Ridzuan says it's not true that those with heart disease or who have had heart surgery should not be vaccinated.

They should get the vaccine because of the protection it offers, he says.

"Otherwise, they are at risk of developing a severe infection should they contract Covid-19," he adds.