**Stress of the Holidays**

The holidays are notorious for celebrations featuring both rich foods and an abundance of alcoholic beverage choices, which could encourage over-indulgence. The holidays are also a time where most of us put pressure on ourselves to get everything “just right” for our family and friends – parties, holiday programs, meals, baking, decorating, shopping, piled on top of our normal daily routines may cause feeling like we never get a moment to relax.

While there has been no conclusive evidence excess stress leads directly to heart disease, it may cause people to engage in activities which have been shown to directly affect the heart. Excessive drinking, smoking, and overeating to “manage” stress leads to obvious strains on the body in general, and the heart secondarily by raising blood pressure which can damage arteries.

**Cold Weather**

Snow removal is an unfortunate fact of life for many of us during the coldest winter months. Whether it involves a shovel, snowblower, or plow (or a combination of all three), it is never a fun or pleasant task. Many who do not have a regular exercise routine will still pick up the shovel and head out to the sidewalk and/or driveway and find themselves pushing their physical limits to complete the task, especially if it is wet, heavy snow.

It is not just a lack of muscle to blame for the physical strain on the heart while shoveling snow or even doing other outdoor tasks or sports such as skiing or pulling your toddler in a sled behind you. Cold causes your blood vessels to narrow, raising your blood pressure, reducing blood flow to the heart, all of which can lead to heart attack and ultimately sudden cardiac arrest.

**High Blood Pressure and Holiday Eating**

Having high blood pressure already puts you at risk for heart complications. If you have ever “felt your blood boil” when dealing with the in-laws at a holiday dinner, or felt that little vein throb in your forehead while your patience is being tried, odds are your blood pressure has gone up slightly.

As stated earlier, cold weather also exacerbates high blood pressure. Even a big meal can contribute. High-protein foods like turkey, meats, and dairy products help your body produce norepinephrine, a stress hormone. While some of this hormone can be a good thing, too much can contribute to high blood pressure.

Digestion requires extra oxygen from the blood vessels in our stomach. The demand we place on these blood vessels increases when we ask it to digest a larger, richer meal than we normally eat. If you have ever felt your heart race after a big meal, it was your heart putting in overtime to help your stomach process those mashed potatoes, green bean casserole, turkey, gravy, and pie.

**Alcohol and Blood Pressure**

An overabundance of alcohol on top of our rich, fatty meal does much more harm than good, no matter how much more tolerant it may make you of your relatives. Having more than three drinks at one sitting can increase your blood pressure temporarily, while long-term excess drinking can lead to chronic high blood pressure.

**Have a Happy, Healthy Holiday Season**

Celebrating the holidays with traditional fare and some good cheer can make the holidays brighter, but pay attention to the signals your body may send you and understand your current state of health. Avoid stress if you can – don’t put too much pressure on yourself to get everything just right. Give yourself time to relax and really enjoy the holidays.

Know your limits when it comes to being out in the cold and what your body can withstand from an exercise standpoint. If you haven’t worked out all year, now is not the time to go hardcore cardio with the shovel moving 3 feet of wet, heavy snow.

If you have high blood pressure, be conscious of the foods you eat, find ways to deal with your stress which don’t involve food, smoking, or drinking, and stay warm! Follow your doctor’s advice and have a wonderful holiday season!