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# Can Heart Attack Risk Start In Your 30s? What New Research And Doctors Are Warning

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Heart attacks are often associated with older age, but new research by Northwestern Medicine, published this year in the **Journal of the American Heart Association**, suggests that the risk of cardiovascular disease may begin rising as early as the mid-30s.

Cardiovascular disease remains the leading cause of death worldwide, taking around 17.9 million lives each year, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Yet awareness about early risk remains low among younger adults, many of whom assume that heart problems are something to worry about later in life. The new findings suggest that the foundations of heart disease may be laid much earlier, long before symptoms appear.

The research found that men in their mid-30s have nearly double the risk of developing cardiovascular disease within the next decade compared with women of the same age. The findings are drawing attention because they challenge the long-standing belief that heart disease primarily affects people in their 50s or 60s.

## How Does The Heart Attack Risk Develop With Age?

Heart disease rarely develops suddenly. Instead, it is typically the result of gradual changes that take place inside the body over many years.

One of the most important processes behind heart attacks is atherosclerosis, which is the build-up of fatty deposits, cholesterol, and inflammatory cells inside the walls of arteries. Over time, these deposits form plaques that narrow blood vessels and restrict blood flow.

As people age, blood vessels naturally lose some of their elasticity, and cholesterol levels may increase. These changes can accelerate plaque formation in the arteries that supply blood to the heart.

When a plaque ruptures, it can trigger a blood clot that blocks the artery completely. This interruption of blood flow to the heart muscle is what causes a heart attack.

Because this process develops slowly, damage to the arteries can begin years or even decades before symptoms become noticeable. That is why cardiologists increasingly stress prevention and risk monitoring early in adulthood rather than waiting until middle age.

## Why Younger Adults Are Facing Higher Heart Risks

Although cardiovascular disease has traditionally been associated with older age, several modern lifestyle trends are increasing the risk among younger adults.

"Risk of heart attack can begin on an earlier basis than most of the people can assume, often from the mid-30s onwards. Traditionally, cardiovascular disease mainly appears in old people, but changing lifestyles, stress, sedentary habits, and metabolic conditions are now pushing risk to the younger age group as well. Some of the early signs, such as increased level of cholesterol, high blood pressure, obesity, and resistance to insulin, can develop silently during this period. Therefore, individuals in their 30s should start paying attention to their heart's health through regular check-ups and managing their lifestyle," said Dr Sunil Christopher, Consultant, Interventional Cardiology, SPARSH Hospital, RR Nagar, Bangalore.

Long working hours, financial pressures, and sleep deprivation can increase levels of stress hormones in the body, which may affect blood pressure, metabolism, and inflammation.

Smoking and excessive alcohol consumption also remain major contributors to cardiovascular disease, particularly among younger men.

Together, these factors are contributing to a worrying trend: increasing reports of heart attacks among adults under the age of 40 in many parts of the world.

According to the Indian Heart Association, nearly 25% of heart attacks in men occur before the age of 40. Some reports also suggest that about 1 in 5 heart patients is aged 40 or younger.

Johns Hopkins has noted an increase in heart attacks among women aged 35–54. This trend shows that heart disease is no longer limited to older people.

**Why Men And Women Face Different Heart Attack Risks**

The Northwestern Medicine research highlights an important difference in how heart disease risk develops between men and women.

Men tend to develop cardiovascular disease earlier in life. By around age 35, measurable differences in risk levels between men and women begin to emerge. Several biological and behavioural factors may contribute to this pattern.

Men and women have different heart disease risks mainly because of hormones and HDL levels. Women have estrogen, which helps protect the heart and keeps blood vessels healthy. Because of this, women usually develop heart disease later than men, often after menopause. Men do not have this hormonal complexity, which is why their cardiovascular risk begins rising earlier," said Dr. Vijay D'silva, Medical Director of White Lotus International Hospital and Clinical Advisor and Mentor of Heartnet India.

He further said fat distribution also differs between the sexes. "Men tend to accumulate more visceral fat around the abdomen, which is strongly linked to inflammation, diabetes, and plaque buildup in the arteries. Women, especially before menopause, store more fat around the hips and thighs, which is metabolically less harmful."

Finally, arterial disease develops differently. Men often develop bigger blockages in their heart arteries earlier in life. Women usually develop heart disease later and sometimes in smaller vessels, he added.

However, doctors note that the gap between men and women is narrowing in some regions as lifestyle patterns change.

**What Are The Additional Signs Of A Heart Attack?**

While traditional risk factors such as high blood pressure, cholesterol and smoking remain central to cardiovascular disease, researchers are increasingly paying attention to additional biological markers that may influence risk.

One of these is Lipoprotein(a), a type of cholesterol particle that is largely determined by genetics. Elevated levels of Lipoprotein(a) are associated with a higher risk of heart attacks and strokes, and the condition is relatively common in some populations.

Chronic inflammation is another factor receiving growing attention. Persistent inflammation in the body can contribute to plaque formation and destabilisation in the arteries.

Certain autoimmune diseases, which involve abnormal immune system activity, have also been linked to higher cardiovascular risk.

In women, pregnancy-related complications such as preeclampsia or gestational diabetes may signal higher long-term heart disease risk later in life.

Researchers say these emerging risk indicators are helping doctors develop more sophisticated tools to identify people who may benefit from earlier intervention.

"Apart from classic symptoms such as chest pain or pressure, there are several early warning signs people often overlook. These include unexplained fatigue, breathlessness during routine activity, palpitations, dizziness, discomfort in the jaw, neck or left arm, and excessive sweating. Some patients may also experience indigestion-like discomfort or mild chest tightness. In younger individuals, particularly, these symptoms are frequently ignored or attributed to stress or acidity. Recognizing

these early warning signals and seeking medical evaluation promptly can significantly reduce the risk of a major cardiac event," said Dr Anil Mishra, Director, Cardiology, BM Birla Heart Hospital, Kolkata.

Environmental factors such as pollution and early metabolic changes, such as rising LDL or blood sugar, can also quietly raise heart attack risk long before symptoms appear, pointed out Dr D'silva.

**Why Do Doctors Recommend Early Screening?**

One concern highlighted by recent research is that traditional cardiovascular risk calculators may underestimate risk in younger adults.

These tools often estimate the likelihood of a heart attack or stroke over the next ten years. Because younger individuals generally have lower short-term risk, early warning signs may not always trigger clinical concern. However, many experts now argue that lifetime risk should receive greater attention.

"Early screening is essential because heart disease develops silently over decades. By the time symptoms appear, the condition may already be advanced. With teleconsultations, young adults can easily discuss early risk factors with cardiologists. Remote monitoring helps track key health indicators continuously, while remote ECG devices allow heart rhythm checks from home. This gives doctors a clearer picture of cardiovascular risk and enables timely lifestyle changes and preventive treatment," stressed Dr D'silva.

In many countries, particularly in Europe and the US, clinical guidelines are increasingly encouraging cardiovascular risk assessments earlier in adulthood, starting from the 20s and 30s.

**How Can Heart Disease Be Prevented Early In Life?**

The encouraging news is that heart disease is largely preventable, especially when action is taken early.

“Preventing heart disease begins with adopting healthy lifestyle habits early in life. Regular physical activity, maintaining a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and limiting processed foods can significantly reduce risk. Avoiding smoking, moderating alcohol intake, managing stress, and ensuring adequate sleep are equally important. Routine health check-ups help track blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar levels. Small but consistent lifestyle changes during the younger years can go a long way in protecting heart health and preventing premature cardiac events," said Dr Mishra.

Regular medical check-ups, consistent monitoring of blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar levels and making healthier lifestyle choices can detect heart risks early and prevent major problems later, suggested Dr D’silva.

For individuals with strong family histories of cardiovascular disease or genetic risk factors, doctors may recommend earlier or more frequent screening.