Long working hours and stress can cause high blood pressure, which can lead to heart attack and stroke, say doctors

Two years ago, private-hire driver Thir Lachan Singh was walking to the carpark when he suddenly started sweating and felt a sharp pain in the middle of his chest.

He was taken to Ng Teng Fong General Hospital, where he was found to have had a heart attack. The next day, Mr Singh underwent stent surgery to keep his artery from narrowing or closing again.

Before the heart attack, the 66-year-old had been working the graveyard shift for 30 to 12 hours a day for five years. As a result, he made unhealthy lifestyle choices.

"Whenever I was hungry at 2am, I had no choice but to eat what was available at that time, like roti prata and mee goung. Working long hours, a lack of exercise and unhealthy late-night meals led to my heart attack," says Mr Singh, who is overweight and has hypertension and diabetes.

Overwork and the lack of work-life boundaries have become concerns, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. In a study released in May, Singapore was ranked the second most overworked city globally, after Hong Kong, in technology company Glassdoor's 2021 World-Life Balance Index.

Experts say prolonged work can lead to chronic stress and fatigue, sleep deprivation and an unhealthy diet and lifestyle, which can cause hypertension, heart attack, stroke and even mental health problems.

Dr Sahai Khanna, a senior consultant cardiologist at The Harley Street Heart & Vascular Centre, says stress from overwork can kick-start the fight-or-flight response that raises blood pressure and breaks down the body.

"The problem is, when the stress response is chronically heightened, it can lead to high blood pressure and eventually athero-atherosclerotic heart disease, which occurs when plaque builds up inside the arteries, subsequently causing a heart attack," he adds.

Whether it is linked to Covid-19, a deadline or meetings round the clock, Dr Khanna notes that when stress is almost constant, it potentially keeps cortisol (stress hormone) levels and blood pressure high for days, weeks or even months.

This persistent increased blood pressure can result in the development of heart disease, which may lead to conditions such as heart attack and/or stroke. Complications from hypertension can also cause loss of vision and kidney failure.

Professor Tan Huay Cheew, chairman of the Singapore Heart Foundation, says coronary artery disease can occur in adults who overwork, lead an unhealthy lifestyle and have medical conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and high cholesterol.

In Mr Singh's case, Prof Tan, a senior consultant at the Department of Cardiology at the National University Heart Centre, Singapore, says his cardiovascular risk factors of being overweight, having hypertension, a poor diet and being physically inactive should have prompted an early cardiovascular screening and intervention.

Cabbie drivers, in particular, lead a sedentary lifestyle with little opportunity to exercise. At the same time, they know where to find food they like, which may not be necessarily healthy, adds Prof Tan.

He suggests they devote 15 to 20 minutes daily to walks or do other exercises, make healthier food choices and get at least eight hours of sleep.

Office workers may be at risk of heart problems linked to overwork too, especially those who have to attend virtual meetings or meet deadlines that cater to the European and United States time zones.

Dr Khanna, who sees such patients, says poor sleep and fatigue are common complaints.

He says: "Unlike they dedicate time to exercise, unhealthy dietary patterns and weight gain inevitably creep in. Followed by hypertension and pre-diabetes."

"The ones who succeed to heart-related problems are those with an increased risk profile such as a strong family history of premature heart disease or chronic smokers."

Working from home during the pandemic may have worsened the problem of overwork, say doctors.

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Cultivate work-life balance

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Heightened restrictions, compulsory adoption of work from home and restricted air travel during this period have resulted in longer working hours for many of Dr Khrana’s patients.

“I have witnessed heart problems manifest in many such people, but to prove that the cause is longer working hours is not straightforward,” he says.

Prof Tan says achieving optimal work-life balance is key to preventing premature death from overwork.

“It is not just the individual who needs to be aware of this, but trade unions and the Government should also be collectively involved in workers’ health,” he adds.

Promoting shorter working hours, making healthcare services accessible, encouraging voluntary health examinations and enhancing the effectiveness of medical care should be part of corporate culture and personal responsibility, says Prof Tan.

Dr Khrana recommends that people limit work hours to less than 40 hours a week if possible.

“Take breaks throughout the workday – stepping away from your workstation, even for a few minutes, can do wonders for controlling stress levels.”

After the health scare, Mr Thir Lochan Singh, who has two grandchildren aged eight and 10, stopped working the graveyard shift and now drives only up to seven hours a day.

He goes to the gym four to five times a week and makes healthier food choices by eating food such as brown bread, brown rice and vegetables, and avoiding sugary and salty food.

Says Mr Singh: “People should make it a point to cultivate work-life balance. Although working long hours may sometimes be inevitable, it is important to listen to your body, take frequent breaks, eat healthily and make time for exercise.”

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How to take care of your heart

1. SET BOUNDARIES
   Be mindful in recognising when you are at work and when you are on a break.
   Set physical boundaries by working in a separate space from where you spend your leisure time, as it may be hard to relax in a space your brain thinks is an office.
   Mental boundaries, on the other hand, require you to determine when you do or do not work. This includes making an effort not to mix family or self-care time with work.

2. LIMIT YOUR WORK HOURS
   Try limiting your work hours to less than 40 hours a week if possible. Take breaks throughout the workday – stepping away from your workstation, even for a few minutes, can do wonders for controlling stress levels.
   You can do something you enjoy, such as listening to music, reading a book or getting a massage.

3. EAT HEALTHILY
   Try sticking to a Mediterranean diet, which includes vegetables, fruit, fish, beans and whole grains, as it has been proven to help prevent heart disease.
   Keep your sodium intake to less than 2,000mg a day, which is equivalent to about less than a teaspoon of salt.

4. EXERCISE REGULARLY
   When you exercise, your heart muscles become more efficient in pumping out higher volumes of blood, allowing it to beat slower and keep blood pressure low. Make time for at least 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity a week.

5. STOP SMOKING
   Smoking increases your risk of heart disease by raising the heart rate and causing blood to clot in the vessels and arteries.

6. LIMIT ALCOHOL INTAKE
   Excessive and habitual alcohol consumption results in an increased risk of heart rhythm problems and stroke. Do not drink more than two standard drinks a day. A standard drink contains 10g of alcohol.

7. KNOW YOUR RISKS
   Overwork, stress, lack of sleep, smoking, an unhealthy diet, binge drinking and a sedentary lifestyle are risks for the onset of hypertension and heart disease. Go for regular health check-ups and speak to your doctor about your risk profile.

Source: Dr Rohit Khrana, a senior consultant cardiologist with The Harley Street Heart & Vascular Centre, and Professor Tan Huay Cheem, chairman of the Singapore Heart Foundation and a senior consultant at the Department of Cardiology at the National University Heart Centre, Singapore