

The Indian EXPRESS

Beware the silent killer

VIDYA KRISHNAN

BEATING AT the rate of 30 beats a minute for three days, Amit Gupta's heart had almost given up.

When he finally went to a general physician to get medicines for what he assumed was 'viral fever', an ECG revealed that he had suffered a heart attack the previous night.

Coming from a family of car-

diac surgeons, Gupta thought he would know when he was having an attack.

"Even though I could feel each and every beat, I assumed it was a viral infection or something because I did not have the classic symptoms of chest pain or sweating," he said. "I thought I could have a lot of things but not a heart attack since I did not even have a family history."

According to experts, the so-

called "silent" heart attacks are either completely asymptomatic or have mild symptoms which the patient dismisses as indigestion or heartburn — which is what happened in Gupta's case.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recently stated one in every four heart attacks will happen without any symptoms or at least none that the victim associates with a heart problem.

It was based on a study —

published in the *Journal of the American College of Chest Physicians* — and conducted at Duke University Medical Center, US. It evaluated patients with coronary artery disease, but without any previous evidence of heart attack.

Over a two-year follow-up, it was observed that patients who suffered silent heart attack had triple the death rate compared to other cardiac patients, mainly because they are less likely to receive medications to slow the progression of a heart attack in time as the attack is

asymptomatic.

"Though there has not been a study on the Indian population, more cases are now being reported simply because diagnostic techniques have improved," said Dr Sampat Kumar, chief of the Cardiothoracic and Neurosciences Department at All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in Delhi. "If I were to hazard a guess, I would say close to 10 per cent of patients die waiting for treatment."

The key to recovering from a heart attack is the swiftness with which the patient receives

treatment. In case of a silent heart attack, since the patient is unaware of the infarction, valuable time is wasted and the heart becomes permanently damaged. "Silent heart attacks may strike anyone, but people most likely to experience them are those who had a prior heart attack, individuals who have diabetes and elderly patients with high blood pressure.

"There are risk factors but the attack can be completely asymptomatic," said Dr Praveen Chandra, who treated Gupta at Max Devki Devi Heart Institute.