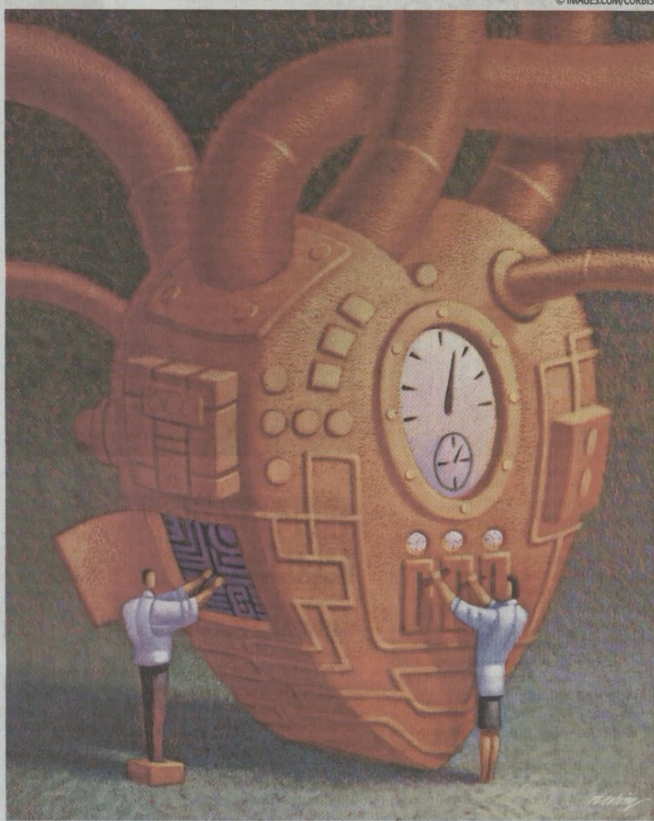


# Times of India Crest

## Killing us SOFTLY

It's as subtle as a snake in the grass — and as deadly. The silent heart attack is here. Ignore it at your peril

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**S**ixty-two-year-old G P Garg had been feeling a strange discomfort while sleeping, every night for a whole week. It wasn't pain, more a slight palpitation with a burning sensation in his throat. Since there was a free heart camp near his house, Garg went in for a quick check-up.

When cardiologist Dr K K Agarwal from Moolchand Hospital conducted an ECG, Garg found, to his horror, that he had suffered a heart attack. 10 days ago. "But how can it be?" he protested. "I haven't felt any pain whatsoever. I'm not diabetic. I don't smoke or drink. My blood pressure and cholesterol are normal."

Heart attacks, Garg quickly learnt, are fast changing and don't necessarily come with thunder and lightning, aka spasms of chest pain and sweating. They can be as subtle as a snake in the grass, and as deadly. Garg is one of an increasing number of Indians suffering from what is called a silent heart attack or disguised myocardial infarction — the deadlier for being overlooked and underestimated.

Since such an attack doesn't cause severe chest pain — a symptom largely associated with a heart attack — but is characterised by vague bouts of heartburn or breathlessness, both patient as well as physician tend not to take it seriously. An ECG is not done. The result — death within hours, depending on the severity of the attack. It can also lead to an increased risk of fatality if there is a similar attack in the future, followed by irregular heart rhythms. Garg would probably have gone about his business had there not been a heart check-up camp near his house.

Interventional cardiologists say almost one-third of all new cases of heart attacks in India are of the silent variety. Dr Agarwal, who is the president of the Heart Care

Foundation of India, says that patients, especially those over 40, must look out for symptoms like acidity and sudden bouts of mild exhaustion accompanied by sweating. "Silent attacks are common in diabetics, the elderly, those suffering from hypertension, and in patients on the day after any surgery. Silent heart attacks are also more common among women," he says.

According to him, there are three thumb rules one needs to know: acidity cannot occur for the first time in anyone over the age of 40; the first attack of breathlessness in the 40-plus segment cannot be asthma; finally, any pain that lasts less than 30 seconds is not heart pain.

Dr Deepak Natarajan, head of Max Hospital's interventional cardiology unit, says the elderly are 20% more vulnerable to dying of a silent heart attack. "Indians

Heart Association said that undiagnosed or silent heart attacks affect nearly 200,000 people in the US annually. As many as 40%–60% of these stay unrecognised.

Says Dr Purushottam Lal, chief cardiologist at Metro Heart Institute, "In most heart attack cases, the victim's ECG shows an earlier episode that the patient has no clue about. Most of them have had no symptoms of heart attacks earlier."

According to a recent study by Duke University Medical Center, these silent heart attacks now occur more frequently than we think. Doctors can usually tell by looking at an ECG whether a patient has suffered a heart attack or not. They look for the Q-wave, a marker for damaged tissue. However, not all silent heart attacks result in Q-waves. So what is the solution? "Advanced MRI technologies like

**Because we expect heart attacks to be accompanied by severe chest pain, we often fail to identify a silent attack and, therefore, don't respond in time**

fail to identify the silent attack, and don't respond immediately. A silent attack manifests itself in a different way like a sudden and severe bout of coughing, a feeling of passing out, pain in the arms and discomfort above the abdomen. These are known as atypical presentations," he says.

Natarajan adds, "If anybody complains of such symptoms, they should be taken for an ECG immediately because that's the only way to know if it's a heart attack. The prognosis of silent attacks is as bad as a painful one." Interestingly, cardiologists say that the majority of sudden deaths at night are cases of silent heart attacks.

The growing occurrence of painless heart attacks is now being recorded across the globe. A recent study found that annually about 1,460,000 Americans suffer from heart attacks, of which 195,000 or 13% go unnoticed. A 2009 report by the American

delayed enhancement cardiovascular magnetic resonance are in use in some countries and should be available in hospitals in India soon. Such advanced methods are good at finding damaged heart tissue, however slight," says Agarwal.

A heart attack, for the record, is the result of a clot in the way of the blood flow from a coronary artery to the heart. The first hour of a heart attack is known as the golden hour. If you get help within those sixty precious minutes, your chances of recovery are much greater.

Heart attacks frequently occur between 4 am and 10 am due to higher adrenaline amounts released by the adrenal glands during the morning hours. Increased adrenaline in the bloodstream can contribute to the rupture of the plaque that causes the formation of the clot, eventually triggering the heart attack.

### What You Don't Know Can Hurt You

A heart attack can occur without any warning or pain. This is a silent heart attack. It has atypical symptoms — heartburn, nausea, sudden light-headedness and sweating.

#### Common Victims

- Women
- Diabetics
- People above 65 years

#### Common Symptoms

Consistent deep pain in chest that can spread to the left arm, neck and jaw. The pain may last for about 12 hours. Many people who have had an attack describe it as a heavy pressure on their chest

#### Common Reasons

The cause of a silent attack, like any other heart attack, is narrowing of the heart's arteries due to cholesterol plaque

**5 million** people suffer from heart attacks each year in India. 1.5 m of these cases are fatal

**60%** of all the heart patients of the world will be Indians by 2060

**25%** of all the diabetics of the world are Indians

**50%** women in India above the age of 50 are obese, diabetic with high risks

