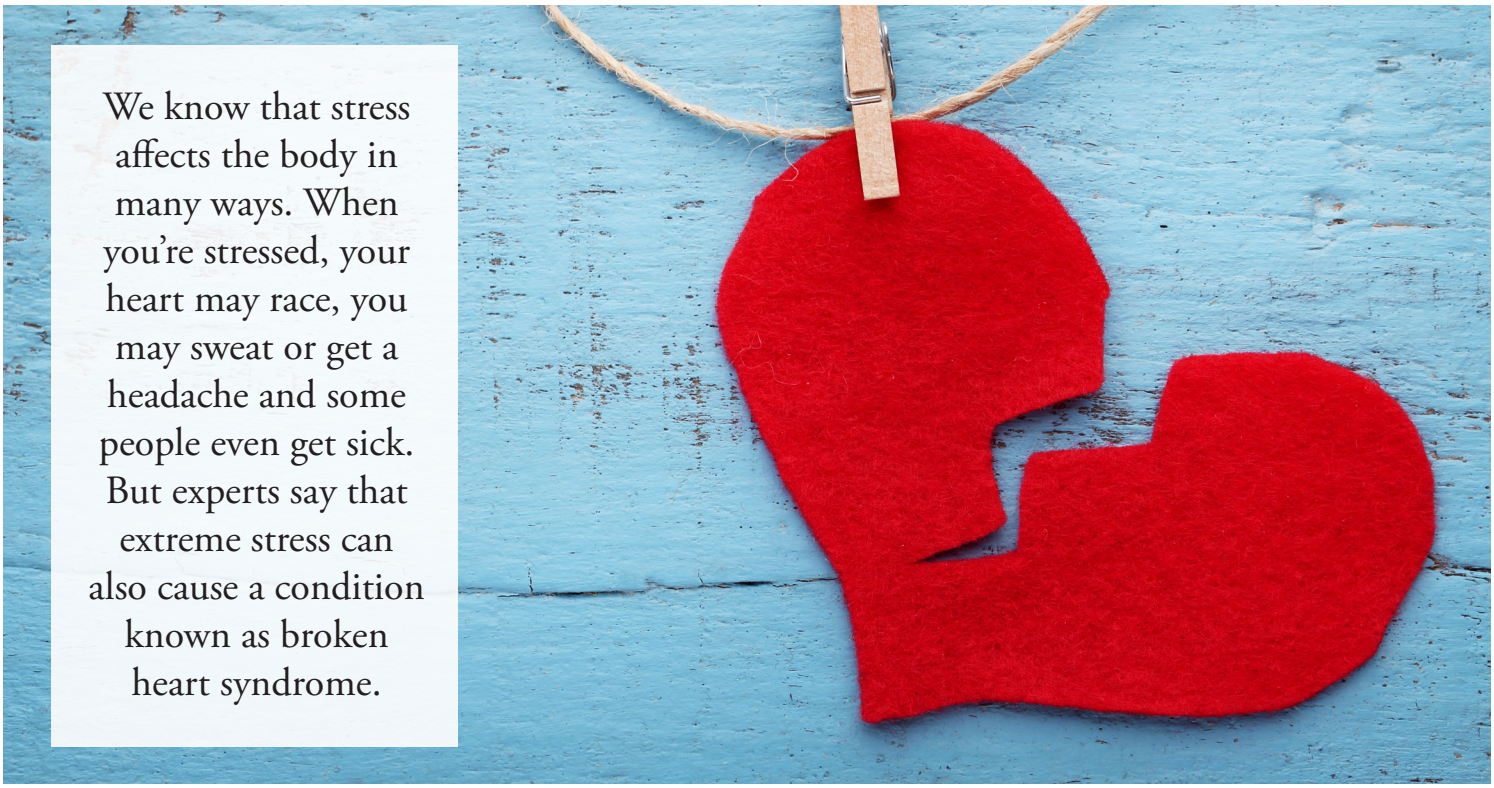
Can stress really break your heart?



We know that stress affects the body in many ways. When you're stressed, your heart may race, you may sweat or get a headache and some people even get sick. But experts say that extreme stress can also cause a condition known as broken heart syndrome.

Broken heart syndrome is sometimes called stress-induced or takotsubo cardiomyopathy. It can happen when someone has extreme stress like grief, shock or anger. It can also happen when the body is under physical stress, such as extreme exercise, surgery or dealing with a serious illness.

Why does broken heart syndrome happen?

Some medical experts believe that a high release of stress hormones affects how well the heart can pump blood, causing a problem with the heart muscle. This effect is only temporary, however, and the heart usually returns to its normal function. Or, high stress may cause a spasm in one of the arteries that supplies blood to the heart.

What does broken heart syndrome look like?

Symptoms of broken heart syndrome look a lot like a heart attack. They include chest pain and feeling out of breath. These symptoms begin within a few minutes to hours after the stressful event happens.

Because there's no way to know if you have broken heart syndrome or a heart attack, it's important to go to the emergency room if you notice these symptoms. Usually, the doctors will run tests like a chest x-ray, EKG or other procedures to see how the heart is working. These tests are painless.

How is it treated?

First, the doctors will want to improve blood flow to the heart. Certain medicines for blood pressure may be used or blood thinners. In some cases, medicines for anxiety are used to help lower stress hormones in the body.

Some people may need to stay in the hospital for a few days. Most people recover within a few days without any long-term damage to their heart.

Remember, if you have chest pain or shortness of breath, it's always important to get medical help right away.

Source: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute