

Are these sudden deaths a coincidence?

By Sarah Ng - Nov 19, 2006
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THREE sudden deaths in recent weeks, all of them involving apparently healthy young men who died in their sleep, have prompted many Singaporeans - most of them men - to wonder whether they too might be at risk.

While the actual causes of these deaths are not yet known - post-mortem results are still pending - they have been a popular topic in online forums like Stomp and Sammyboy, with people asking if sudden death strikes only men, or if it is really possible just to go to sleep and not wake up again.

Last Monday, store manager Soh Chee Yong, 25, became the latest man to die mysteriously in his sleep. His mother had woken him up for work that morning, but he went back to bed again, telling her it was his day off. He never woke up.

On Oct 24, student Danil Shagimardanov, 16, was found dead in bed on his birthday by his family, who had gone into his room to wake him up for a celebration. He had died of cardio-respiratory failure.

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Three days later, Dr Christopher Lim, 35, died suddenly. The father of four apparently had a seizure in the early hours of the morning.

All three victims had no known health problems or family history of sudden deaths.

While doctors said that the three deaths were a coincidence and not related in any way, the phenomenon is in fact not that unusual.

The National Heart Centre studied the data of sudden deaths in Singapore between 2001 and 2003 and found that about 300 people aged between 18 and 60 die suddenly each year. It was not known how many had died in their sleep.

Most deaths were caused by cardiovascular conditions. Three per cent had no known cause.

Still, there is no cause for alarm, said cardiologist Teo Wee Siong, a senior consultant at the centre.

"For a healthy person with no family history of sudden death, congenital heart disease and multiple risk factors such as diabetes and hypertension, the chances of collapsing from sudden cardiac death are small. It is estimated to be one in 1,000," said Dr Teo.

Men seem to be more at risk as they are generally more prone to coronary artery disease, he added.

There is no well-documented data on the incidence of sudden death during sleep, he said, but a 1994 French study found one-third of all sudden deaths occur during sleep.

Dr Low Lip Ping, consultant cardiologist and chairman of the Singapore Heart Foundation, said that often, victims had congenital or underlying heart conditions they were not aware of, such as a blockage in a blood vessel or the heart.

Thick or swollen heart muscles, leaking heart valves, defects in the heart's electrical system and severe viral infection causing inflammation of the heart have also been responsible.

Dr Prem Pillay, a consultant neurosurgeon at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre, said that another possibility is a sudden massive bleeding in the brain, caused by an abnormal cluster of blood vessels some people are born with.

But there is no need for people with no family history of these problems to rush off for a heart or brain scan, doctors said.

If detected early, abnormalities in the heart or brain can be treated with medication, surgery or devices such as a pacemaker.

What is important, said doctors, is to minimise the chances of developing a heart condition through a balanced diet, regular exercise and strict control of existing conditions like hypertension, diabetes and high cholesterol.

Source: www.asia1.com