

While sudden collapse may seem instantaneous, doctors say there are often subtle warning signs.

BY SYLVIA NAMAGEMBE

# Heart attack: Spotting danger before it strikes

The sudden collapse of David Kitagenda Magezi on Saturday, February 21, around 1 pm near a bustling market on Bulamu-Mityana road set tongues wagging and sparked public concern about sudden deaths.

Footage circulating on social media showed Magezi lying motionless beside a silver vehicle, its boot wide open and packed to the brim with shopping items. The incident reportedly occurred around 1 pm along a muddy roadside lined with motorcycles and stalls, as seen in the video.

Onlookers are heard saying he had been buying items moments earlier. Yet, in the footage, no immediate medical assistance or first aid was provided, almost as if help was nowhere to be found when it was needed most.

Academia-turned-activist Stella Nyanzi later identified the deceased as her cousin. In a post on X (formerly Twitter), Dr Nyanzi described Magezi as the eldest son of the late Frederick F. Magezi, former executive director of the National Insurance Corporation, and Marjorie Magezi of Muyenga Tank Hill, Kampala.

She added that Magezi was a hotel manager and a devout Christian, remembered by family and friends as kind, attentive, and service-oriented—a man who always went the extra mile.

As of press time, police had not responded nor provided any post-mortem information, despite countless attempts, leaving the public feeling like they were grasping at straws.

## Experts' take

While the exact cause of Magezi's sudden collapse remains unconfirmed, medical experts say several underlying conditions can trigger unconsciousness and death, often linked to undiagnosed or poorly managed illnesses.

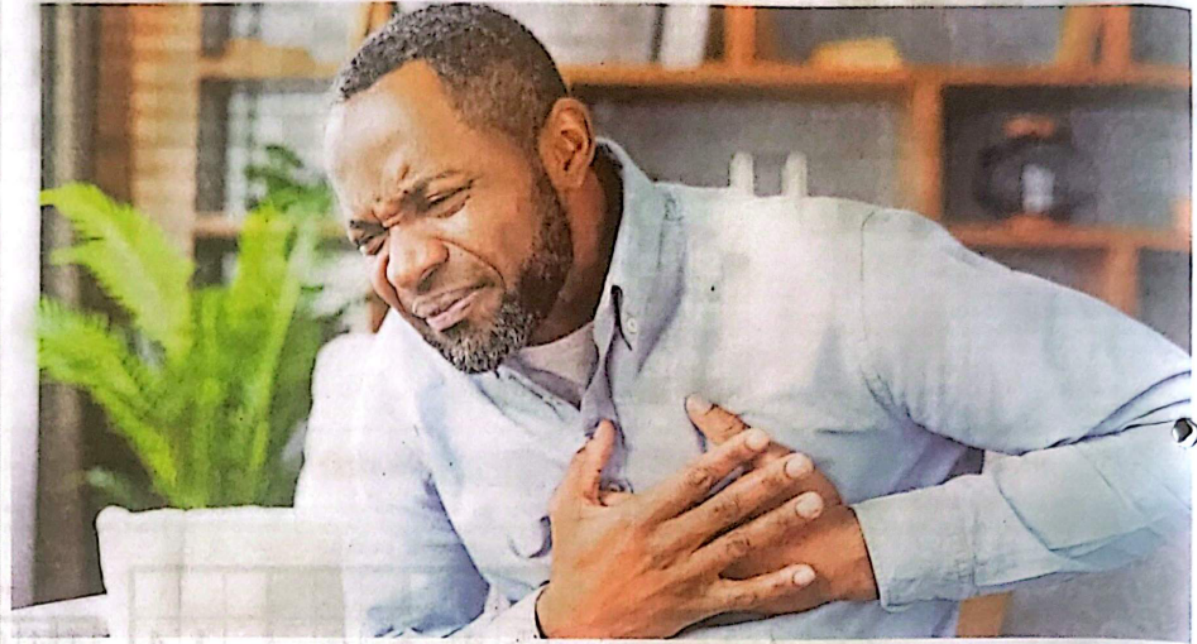
Dr Justus Atuhaire, a doctor at Mulago National Referral Hospital, explains that sudden collapse can result from a range of medical emergencies affecting vital organs such as the brain, heart, lungs, blood vessels, or hormonal systems.

"You need to understand a person's history, their age, occupation, whether they smoke or drink alcohol, and whether there is a family history of sudden collapse or chronic illness. All those factors matter," he explains.

Although heart-related conditions are among the leading culprits, they are not the only ones. According to him, medical emergencies can spring from multiple systems in the body—sometimes striking like a bolt from the blue.

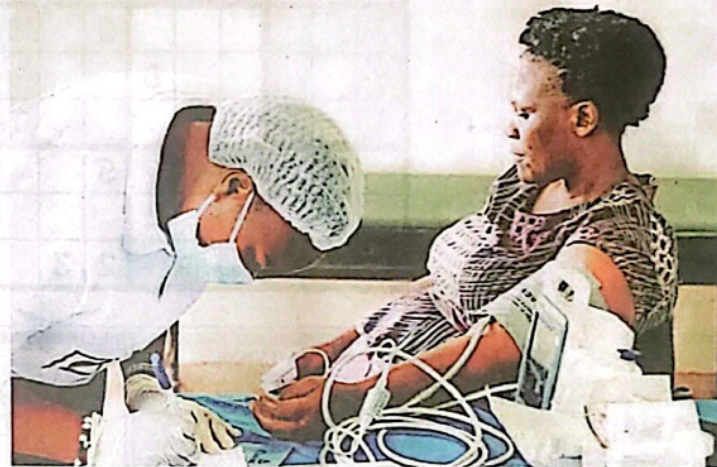
"A stroke or brain bleeding can lead to rapid deterioration. In the heart, reduced oxygen supply known as myocardial ischemia, can weaken the heart muscle and cause sudden failure. Also, abnormal heart rhythms can trigger collapse without warning," Dr Atuhaire adds.

He further explains that a clot may silently travel to the lungs and suddenly block oxygen, or a major blood vessel may rupture, leading to massive internal bleeding. "A sharp swing in blood sugar can push the body into shock.



Medical experts say several underlying conditions can trigger unconsciousness and death. PHOTO/SHUTTER STOCK

A woman undergoes a checkup during a health camp organised by the Uganda Heart Institute at Hoima Regional Referral Hospital last year. Experts recommend regular check-ups to detect such heart conditions. PHOTO/FILE



Even disorders of the thyroid or adrenal glands can quietly interfere with vital functions until the body can no longer compensate."

He continues: "Sometimes the body adjusts to disease over time. But when a condition develops suddenly, or when multiple risk factors combine, the threshold for death becomes lower."

## Other factors

Dr Sylvester Ssemamanda, a physician at St Francis Hospital Nsambya, says one of the most puzzling aspects of sudden death is that not everyone with the same condition meets the same fate.

"Factors such as genetics, immunity, environment,

and additional stressors play a significant role," he reveals. "A person with long-standing high blood pressure may appear stable for years, while another experiencing a sudden spike may collapse because the body changes can overwhelm it," he adds.

According to the 2023 Ministry of Health report, Uganda is facing a rising burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), with 27 percent of deaths attributed to chronic cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and cancer. Risk factors such as high blood pressure, obesity, and alcohol consumption are on the rise, painting a picture of a ticking time bomb. Dr Atuhaire highlights

**27% CHRONIC DEATHS**

er risk factors, including alcohol consumption, drug abuse, obesity, unmanaged HIV/Aids stress, high caffeine intake, and poor medication adherence, can compound existing diseases. He says these add an effect that piles up until the body can no longer bear the load.

## Warning signs

While sudden collapse may seem instantaneous, Dr Ssemamanda says there are often subtle warning signs.

"A person may experience chest discomfort, dizziness, shortness of breath, palpitations, or unusual fatigue in the hours or days before an event," he explains. "Recognising these early signs and seeking urgent medical attention can save lives, but unfortunately, people never take these seriously and instead

## KEY ISSUES

### Warning signs of sudden collapse

- Dizziness
- unusual fatigue
- palpitations
- Chest discomfort
- shortness of breath

### Prevention of sudden collapse

- Regular medical checkups
- timely medical attention
- reduce alcohol consumption
- ensure proper diet (prioritising fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and healthy fats can support heart health and reduce risk of sudden collapse and death)
- prevent obesity and fight stress
- manage chronic conditions

problem gradually," he adds.

Dr Ssemamanda emphasises that immediate action can save lives. "If someone collapses, the first step is to check whether the person is breathing. If they are, place them in a recovery position on their left side with the head supported," he explains. "If they are not breathing, start cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) immediately by pressing on the chest to mimic the heart's pumping action until medical help arrives or the patient starts breathing."

Dr Ssemamanda adds that communities should be trained in basic first aid, and emergency kits should be available in busy public spaces such as markets, schools, and transport hubs because