

Protecting Yourself From Heart Disease

by: Edward Yoon, M.D.

Heart disease is the leading cause of death for men and women in the U.S., but you can be proactive in limiting your risk of suffering from a heart-related ailment. Living a healthy lifestyle and not ignoring symptoms of potential heart trouble will go a long way toward prolonging your life. It's unfortunate that more than 400,000 people will die suddenly in our country this year, many of them from cardiovascular issues—and a large percentage of those people probably thought they were healthy.

Heart Disease 101

Heart failure, stroke and heart attacks all fall under the umbrella of heart disease. If you think these conditions are limited to elderly people, think again; younger women make up one of the growth areas for heart disease. Before turning to prevention, let's look at these three illnesses:

- Heart attacks occur after muscle cells die or are injured when blood flow to a region of heart is suddenly reduced. If a large area of muscle is damaged, it can lead to shock because of pump failure.
- Heart failure occurs after the heart has suffered damage, often from a heart attack, and so many cells have been killed that it can't pump effectively. The primary symptoms of this condition are fatigue and shortness of breath.
- Strokes occur when a sudden severe drop in blood flow to the brain takes place, resulting in a loss of function that can manifest in a number of ways, including vision loss, leg or arm weakness and slurred speech. They're usually caused when plaque buildup breaks off and blocks the flow of blood.

Risk Factors and Prevention

Since some people who suffer from heart ailments will have few risk factors, it's important to be aware of the symptoms of heart disease and be aggressive when you suspect something may be wrong. You must be especially vigilant if someone in your immediate family

has had heart issues at a young age, under 55 for men and under 65 for women. Having routine blood pressure and cholesterol checks is important, as is maintaining a healthy weight, since being a little hypertensive or a little overweight can put undue stress on your heart.

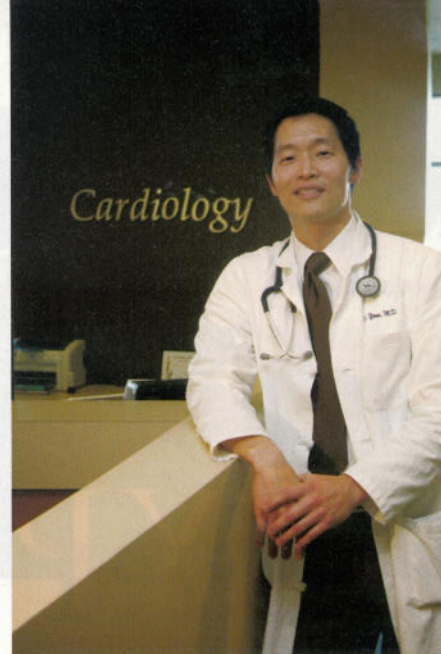
The good news is that you can play an important role in lowering your risk of developing heart disease by following a healthy diet and exercising regularly. Adhering to a Mediterranean-style diet, rich in good fats like nuts and olives as well as fresh fruits and vegetables, is one of the best things you can do for your heart. Eating fish will also help protect you from suffering a heart attack or stroke.

As for exercise, you don't have to be a marathon runner, but it's important to participate in continuous exercise for 20-30 minutes a day, especially activities that get your cardiovascular system going. Inactivity, combined with ingesting too many calories, is a recipe for developing hypertension and potential heart problems.

The fact that our society is becoming more overweight doesn't bode well for reducing the number of deaths related to heart disease, but you can support your healthy heart through diet, exercise, routine blood work and paying attention to any potential symptoms of a problem.

Heart disease is the number one cause of death in the United States. That's why it's so important to reduce your risk factors and know the warning signs. Sutter Regional Medical Foundation will be holding a free community lecture in February, with free health information and giveaways. For more information or to reserve a seat or to receive a free brochure on healthy hearts please call 707-428-2747. ■

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