
The Heart: An Indicator Of Your Well-being

N Soumya

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Abstract

The heart works steadily both in the womb and after birth, till the last breath left in the body. It beats with the rhythm of our daily life and is affected with every step we take. Our lifestyle—food intake, exercise, emotional state, and the environment around us— is responsible for the condition of our hearts. This vital organ beats about 100,000 times in a day, pumping the equivalent of 2,000 gallons of blood. In order to keep the heart working optimally, we have to take good care of it.

Close your fist; the size of your heart is a little larger. The heart is a bundle of muscles that pumps blood through the body. It is the center of the circulatory system, a network that includes arteries, veins, and capillaries. Blood is pumped with each contraction of the two ventricles, or lower chambers of the heart. This synchronized movement of the heart – the upper chambers (atria) contracting and filling the lower chambers, and the lower chambers (ventricles) pumping blood to the body - is audible as the heart beat. Any factor interfering with the heart's ability to pump blood is an indication of bodily imbalance. The American Heart Association (AHA) estimates that each year several thousand Americans develop cardiovascular (heart) disease.

Heart disease has been claiming lives for thousands of years. Why is the medical and scientific community paying extra attention now? Because the number one killer in America, for both men and women, is cardiovascular disease. Advances in medical therapy and disease prevention awareness have decreased deaths due to cardiovascular disease, but more deaths can be prevented. These deaths may be prevented in several ways:

- Early education
- Understanding the disease
- Healthier lifestyles

EARLY EDUCATION

In this era of the information revolution, messages that weed out myths and replace them with facts can reach every corner of the globe. Increasing awareness of cardiovascular risk factors, prevention strategies, and medical diagnostic and treatment options in both adults and children is a good start. Homes, schools, churches, and health fairs around the country are good places to spread the word about cardiovascular health. Brochures in public places, especially those that highlight risk factors, are very helpful for prevention.

UNDERSTANDING THE DISEASE

The risk factors involved can be divided into 2 categories—those that are beyond your control and those that are influenced by from your lifestyle decisions.

The risk factors beyond your control are your hereditary traits. If your parents suffer from cardiovascular disease, the chance of you developing the disease is greater. Race plays a role in defining the risk; African-Americans have a greater risk of heart disease than Caucasians. The older you get, the greater your chances of having a heart attack. Women who are 65 years of age or older are 4 to 5 time more likely to have a heart attack than younger women. Other hereditary diseases can influence the condition of your heart. Diabetes is one of those conditions. Diabetes causes the blood levels of cholesterol and triglycerides to be high, putting a diabetic at a higher risk for cardiovascular disease compared with same-age, same-sex people without diabetes. Another, sometimes hereditary condition, high blood pressure or hypertension, can contribute to heart disease. The heart's pumping load increases if there is high blood pressure, putting extra strain on the heart and making it more prone to heart attacks

HEALTHIER LIFESTYLES

Fortunately, there are risk factors that are under your control. A healthier lifestyle is a sure way of decreasing the risk of heart problems. One way to improve your lifestyle is to improve your diet. We all need good nutritious food to nourish our bodies, including our hearts. However, the food should be the right kind and the right quantity. The kind of food eaten, the caloric content, and the nutritional value should all be taken into account. Eating habits are developed at an early age, so even our children's diets should be balanced. Studies have shown that obesity alone, with no other risk factors, can cause strain on the heart. Obesity increases blood pressure and cholesterol and can lead to diabetes. People who are approximately 30 percent over their ideal body weight are more prone to develop heart disease. Also, according to the AHA, the distribution of fat on the body may influence the risk of heart disease. The ratio of waist measurement to hip measurement calculation is a good indicator of body fat distribution. To get the waist/hip ratio, divide your waist measurement by your hip measurement. Ideally, the ratio should be no greater than 1.0 for men and 0.8 for women. Dietary cholesterol is another issue. Your liver produces all the cholesterol you need, so extra cholesterol in the diet is a big culprit in the development of coronary disease. Therefore, you should limit the amount of saturated fat and cholesterol that you eat.

An active lifestyle also goes a long way toward preventing heart disease. Apart from good eating habits, sedentary living can lead to excess body weight and can cause changes in blood cholesterol levels. Aerobic exercise on a regular basis for an ample time is highly beneficial, whether it's mild, moderate, or rigorous training. There are enormous

numbers of activities to choose from, and they all are beneficial. You can exercise at home or outdoors. Many people find that joining a class helps in sticking to the physical activity. Without moderate amounts of exercise there is a chain of reactions that increases the risk of coronary heart disease. High blood cholesterol is one of the risks that is increased by a sedentary lifestyle. According to the AHA, cholesterol level should be measured at least every 5 years in healthy adults over 20. Your liver produces enough cholesterol to meet your body's requirements, however the type of cholesterol it produces is influenced by exercise. You produce more "good" cholesterol and less "bad" cholesterol when you are exercising, even moderately.

Eating a proper diet and exercising regularly keeps another risk factor, high blood pressure, at bay.

Lastly, smoking and drinking alcohol are factors that are intertwined in this network of preventable risk factors. Everything in moderation is a good way to be healthy.

Eating smart, exercising, and getting regular medical check up can prevent cardiovascular disease to a great extent.

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Author Information

Nidha Soumya

Freelance Writer