

Heart Attacks and Strokes...

Heart disease is the number one cause of death worldwide but there is quite a bit of variation around the globe. Coronary heart disease causes 1 of every 6 deaths in the United States. Each year about 800,000 U.S. citizens experience a new or recurrent stroke with about 75% of these being a first attack. Strokes are the third leading cause of death in the U.S. and the number one cause of adult disability. Major contributors to this are that one third of all U.S. adults have hypertension/high blood pressure and two thirds of us are overweight.

The above statistics from the American Heart Association should make each one of us want to learn more about heart attacks and strokes, particularly the warning signs and what we each can do to try to prevent the negative consequences.

Heart diseases and strokes both are primarily caused by reduced or restrictive blood flow to vital organs. The two disease categories share many of the same risk factors:

- Hypertension: Your risk of high blood pressure increases as you age. A blood pressure of 140 over 90 or above is considered high. As these numbers increase so does the risk of heart attacks or strokes.
- Diabetes: This is the inability of your body to adequately produce insulin. Although it can occur in childhood, it appears most often in middle age and among overweight people.
- High Cholesterol: Your cholesterol level is affected by age, sex, heredity and diet. Risk starts when your LDL is in the 130-159 mg/dL range.
- Overweight: You are considered overweight if your body mass index is 25-29 or obese with a body mass index of 30 or higher.
- Smoking: Smokers have 2 to 4 times the risk of nonsmokers and are much more likely to die from a heart attack. Tobacco smoke damages the interior walls of arteries.
- Physical Inactivity: People who get regular aerobic exercise have better cardiovascular fitness and exercise can also lower your blood pressure.
- Genetics: Family history of stroke, heart disease, high blood pressure or high cholesterol levels increases your personal risk.

A heart attack is the death of, or damage to, part of the heart muscle because the supply of blood to the heart muscle is severely reduced or stopped. Although a heart attack is sudden, the causes of most heart attacks are not sudden as usually years of unhealthy heart habits unexpectedly catch up with you. A diseased heart is like a ticking time bomb. The most common warning signs are:

- Uncomfortable pressure, fullness, squeezing, or pain in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes or goes away but comes back again
- Pain, usually in the left side in the jaw or back that may spread to the shoulders, neck or arms
- Related symptoms such as lightheadedness, sweating, nausea, dizziness, irregular heartbeat or shortness of breath

These signs are common but some heart attacks may have different sensations. About 25% of heart attacks are “silent heart attacks” ... those without any symptoms.

Fortunately there are ways to significantly lower your chances of developing heart disease and in many instances reverse the effects of a current heart condition. Essentially improving your heart health boils down to three key areas: following a heart healthy diet, exercising regularly, and leading a healthy lifestyle.

A stroke is a brain attack. When the blood supply to the brain is cut off or greatly reduced, a stroke may occur. If the blood supply is cut off for several hours or more, the brain cells will die without oxygen.

Depending on the amount of blood involved and location of the stroke area in the brain, a person having a stroke can show many signs and symptoms. These can range from barely noticeable difficulties moving or speaking to paralysis. The National Stroke Association recommends you think of the word FAST:

- **Face:** Ask the person to smile. Does one side of the face drop?
- **Arms:** Ask the person to raise both arms. Does one arm drift downward? Is the person dizzy or having balance problems?
- **Speech:** Ask the person to repeat a simple phrase. Is the speech slurred or strange or is their confusion in using words?
- **Time:** If you observe any of these signs, call 911 immediately

A suspected heart attack or stroke is a medical emergency and 911 should be called immediately. Do NOT drive yourself or wait to see if the symptoms will improve. Fast and appropriate treatment may make a big difference in the outcome.

Are you interested in learning more about heart attack and stroke causes, symptoms, treatments and preventive measures? The topic for the Friday, February 17th 11:30 am - 1:00 pm *Bits and Bites* meeting (a bit of information and a bite to eat) of the Delta College “50+...Just Like Gold Program” will focus on learning about these diseases. Lunch is included. If you are interested in attending this meeting or in becoming a member of the 50+ program, please call the Delta College LifeLong Learning Office at (989) 686-9444 or from the Midland area (989) 495-4000, ext. 9444 as advance registration is required.

Give yourself a valentine heart this month by improving your own heart health! Start today by eating healthier, walking and sleeping more, reducing stress, making new friends and learning more about your circulatory system.

Sue Montesi
Dean Emeritus
Delta College