



Feature Column

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Keeping Your Hometown Healthy

Let's Get to the Heart of the Matter

December 13 - 20, 2002

The heart is one of the most remarkable organs of the human body. We feel its continuous beat about 100,000 times a day – a tremendous, life-sustaining workload. It pumps five-to-six quarts of blood a minute when the body is at rest and automatically adjusts to changing demands. As the need increases for energy – for instance, when we exercise – a healthy heart responds by pumping blood faster to distribute more oxygen and nourishment to muscles and organs.

Just as I am fascinated by the work of the heart, I am also frustrated that Americans do so little to help maintain this vital part of the body. In fact, owner negligence is a major cause of the heart's breakdown. When fats, cholesterol (a fat-like substance found in the body's cells) and other substances build up in coronary arteries, the blood flow can be slowed or blocked. This decreases the oxygen to the heart, leading to heart disease or heart attack. It is ironic that the disease that is responsible for the most deaths of Americans is also one of the most preventable.

Although heredity has some influence on who will and who will not get heart disease, most cases are caused or aggravated by lifestyle choices that can be changed:

- Cigarette/tobacco smoke. Smokers' risk of heart attack is more than twice that of

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nonsmokers;

- As blood cholesterol levels increase the risk of heart disease goes up;
- High blood pressure increases the heart's workload and may cause it to enlarge;
- Physical inactivity may promote weight gain and inactivity increases risk of heart disease.

Other contributing risk factors include diabetes and stress. Even though tremendous progress has been made in treating cardiovascular diseases, they remain the number one cause of death of Americans. Almost 62 million Americans have one or more types of cardiovascular disease. One in five males and females has some form of heart disease.

In 1938, an American physician performed the first heart surgery. Although this and other medical breakthroughs have continued to advance the cause of healing, it seems the advancement of technology has made people more prone to heart disease. With the arrival of automation, life has become less strenuous. Manual labor has been replaced or assisted by machinery. The sedentary tasks of office work offer little or no opportunity for physical activity. Modern conveniences in our homes further diminish the amount of physical activity that we engage in. While our everyday physical activity has slowed significantly, our diet has also changed for the worse. Fried foods, super-sized portions and fat-laden treats, often from fast food restaurants, are now a staple of many Americans' diets. This trade-off in lifestyle and diet has led to diseases that were once uncommon. Before 1900, very few people died of heart disease. A recent study shows that unhealthy levels of cholesterol can begin to form in the cardiovascular system as early as the teenage years. This alarming news emphasizes the need for healthier lifestyles at all ages.

We are becoming increasingly aware that choices about diet, prevention and lifestyle can have a greater influence on our health than all the marvels of modern medicine and technology. There is no

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guarantee that you will not get heart disease, but you can lower your risk factors by following these recommendations by the American Heart Association:

- Stop smoking. The risk of heart disease lowers quickly after a person stops smoking. Heart disease rates for smokers are 100 percent higher than for non-smokers.
- Lower your blood cholesterol. The best way to do this is to eat less fat and cholesterol. Some people may need prescription medicine, too.
- Manage high blood pressure. The only way to know for sure if you have high blood pressure is to have it checked; then follow your doctor's recommendations.
- Increase physical activity. Studies show that being physically fit lowers heart disease risk. Even moderate activity such as walking for 30 to 60 minutes on most days has healthy benefits.

For more information about heart disease prevention, contact the American Heart Association, 1-800-242-8721, or visit the Arkansas Department of Health Web site at www.healthyarkansas.com.

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