

Health column: Coronary heart disease part 1 — Healthy lifestyle limits risk of heart disease

Dr. Arthur L. Zerbey

Do you have heart disease? Does someone in your family? If so, you are not alone. Nearly 16 million Americans suffer from coronary heart disease, and it's a killer. Almost 900,000 Americans died of cardiovascular disease last year — more than all kinds of cancer combined. Cardiovascular disease is the No. 1 cause of death in the United States.

Heart disease has many causes. Some are genetic and run in families. You don't have much control over these. Others are the result of personal choices, and you can do a lot to control them. We've all heard this many times before, but it's still true: Stopping smoking, keeping your weight and blood pressure down and getting enough exercise will go a long way to reduce your risk. Controlling diabetes, if you have it, will help too. It seems simple, but this really does work. Living a healthy lifestyle helps limit your risk of coronary heart disease.

Why do people get chest pain and heart attacks? These conditions are caused by fatty deposits, called plaque, in the heart arteries. The plaque narrows the vessels and reduces blood flow through them. When the flow of blood is reduced the heart muscle doesn't get enough oxygen. The result is heart pain, called angina, or, if damage to the heart occurs, a heart attack.

But how do you know if you have coronary heart disease?

One way, which you want to avoid, is to actually have a heart attack. Sadly, this is the way many people find out. More than a million people had heart attacks last year, and 325,000 died.

Another way is to have chest pain, which is a sign that your heart is not getting enough blood through the narrowed arteries. There are different kinds of angina, from a vague feeling of chest pressure, to a feeling like indigestion, to pain in the jaw and arm. In addition, there are more subtle signs, like shortness of breath and unexplained fatigue.

Many, many people come to emergency rooms with chest pain — more than 5 million did in 2003 — but not all of it is from heart disease. Unfortunately many benign conditions, from muscle strain to esophageal reflux, can have the same symptoms as chest pain, so diagnosing chest

pain can be very difficult.

In part 2 of this column, you will learn about the diagnostic tests that determine if chest pain is caused by coronary artery disease.

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