

Keeping your heart healthy

The Health Column

1395
2014

12 February 2014

We take our hearts for granted but the reality is that if we don't look after them the results can be catastrophic. In fact, cardiovascular disease is the cause of 34% of deaths in Australia, followed by all cancers on 29%.

To find cures for heart disease, we need to constantly undertake research and to raise awareness of this. February has been designated as Red Feb (www.redfeb.com.au) by Heart Research Australia which raises funds for research into the treatment and prevention of heart disease and associated medical conditions.

Heart Research Australia's website (www.heartresearch.com.au) has a wealth of information of healthy hearts, including four simple steps we can undertake to make some inroads into improving our heart's health.

The first is to keep moving at any age and at any level of fitness. Exercise has many benefits beyond simple fitness and flexibility. It stimulates the body's immune system, reduces blood thickening so it clots less easily, improves brain function and lowers blood pressure. Exercise can even prevent some forms of cancer. Research in older patients with age-related muscle wasting (also called sarcopenia) has shown that strength training was found to prevent disability, slow down dementia and reduce the risk of accidental falls. Independence and good health in later life are closely related to physical fitness

The second step is to look at what we eat and to eat intelligently. Good nutrition extends beyond just controlling our intake of cholesterol, calories and chocolate. There is also great benefit in understanding, for example, the important effects of trans fats (bad for you), and polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats (good for you). Or how the body metabolises different carbohydrates (sugars) and the impact this has on weight, diabetes and body fat deposits.

Research consistently shows that the right balance between food intake and exercise is vital for optimum weight, fitness and health. Improved nutritional knowledge truly leads to improved health.



Photo by Walter Groesel | sxc.hu

The third step is to keep track of our health measurements. This includes cholesterol levels, blood pressure, weight, sugar levels, waist circumference and exercise capacity. For years health workers have understood the value of monitoring blood pressure, cholesterol levels, sugar level and body weight. To this we can now add the importance of measuring heart pump function, exercise capacity (6 minute walk test), waist circumference, and kidney function, among many others.

A close relationship between the family doctor and subject will optimise the way good health is measured and monitored. Managing health without measurements is like an ocean racing without a compass.

And the fourth step is your mental approach and staying optimistic. Many studies show your state of mind can protect, as well as damage heart health. Important risk factors that may lead to heart disease include stress, anger and depression. They can be as damaging as high cholesterol levels in causing heart disease. Unaccustomed stress such as the loss of a family member can trigger heart attacks in an otherwise well individual. Conversely, a positive state of mind, a supportive community and personal happiness may help reduce the risk of a bad cardiovascular event.

The importance of doing something now for your heart is highlighted by the fact that 90% of Australians have at least one risk factor for heart disease. The main risk factors include a family history of heart disease, your age as risk increases as you age, and your gender because men are at greater risk of predisposing conditions.

Other risk factors include hypertension, diabetes, smoking, high cholesterol, lack of physical activity and being overweight or obese.

Your pharmacy, your health destination, can provide advice and counselling on heart health. In addition, your local Self Care pharmacy has fact cards on Warning signs of heart attack, and Fat and cholesterol to help. For the location of the nearest pharmacy where you can pick up those Self Care fact cards, phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 or log on to the website at www.psa.org.au and click on Self Care Pharmacy Finder.