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Lifestyle Changes, Early Testing Can Limit The Chances Of Contracting Heart Disease

BY SUSAN CAMPBELL

The cigarette commercials of 30 years ago that touted women had "come a long way, baby" may have been more prophetic than the advertisers knew.

Thanks in part to smoking and other unhealthy lifestyle choices, women are now on a par with men both as smokers and as victims of heart disease.

"Heart disease has surpassed cancer as today's #1 killer of both men and women," said David A. Judkins, MD, FACC, one of a team of nine board-certified cardiologists plus four physician's assistants at Adirondack Cardiology of Glens Falls.

"Women were behind a few decades ago, but they caught up," Dr. Judkins said.

Heart disease is the generic name for atherosclerosis or coronary heart disease, referring to the build-up of cholesterol in the arteries that often leads to heart attacks, strokes and death.

While family history is the greatest risk factor in heart disease, smoking is a close second according to Dr. Judkins, followed by diabetes and high cholesterol. High blood pressure, inactivity and obesity are also major risk factors.

Many of these risk factors can be changed completely or at best reduced, according to the experts.

"The goal is to live as healthy and as long as one can," said Dr. Judkins.

He tells his patients that most people invest regularly in their financial retirement, such as monthly or weekly, but ignore investing in their physical health for their retirement years.

"What good is a financial retirement if you don't have good health?" he asked. "People cannot wait until retirement to start a program of financial health, and neither can they wait until retirement to address their physical health."

Only by beginning now to plan for their future physical health can people get the benefit of the "compound interest" that rewards those who invest sooner than later, he said.

Cardiologists may be seeing a growing incidence of heart disease because of the newer technologies that allow specialists like Dr. Judkins and his peers to detect the disease earlier.

"There are a number of modalities, such as a treadmill test for lower to moderate risk patients. The next step would be a nuclear test to inject material near the

heart and take pictures of the blood flow," Dr. Judkins said.

Higher risk patients may need a heart catheterization, an angiogram with dye in the heart, he said.

"The newest technology is the CT coronary angiography. In this test, dye-like material is injected that shows up in a CAT scan," said Dr. Judkins, adding that this modality is not yet in regular use.

If an individual does not seem to be a statistical risk, there are symptoms to look for that can vary among men and women.

"Women don't have the typical pain in the left arm or chest that men have," said Dr. Judkins. "Their symptoms are more subtle."

These can include an unexplained shortness of breath, unexplained sweating, and an unexplained decrease in exercise capacity.

"For example, if you are used to running five miles on the treadmill in seven-minute miles and now you can only do two miles in 20 minutes," that change could indicate the onset of disease, he said.

He also said that heart pain is often misdiagnosed as indigestion.

"It's difficult to tell the difference. Your doctor has to do a test," he added.

Dr. Judkins cannot overemphasize the importance of the primary care physician in maintaining good heart health.

Oftentimes people seek information on a new diet or exercise program and never mention it to their doctors, he said.

"The point of care should start right there with the primary care physician who can dovetail a healthier lifestyle

regimen with the individual's current medications and medical issues," he said.

Communication with physicians is particularly important now that victims of heart disease are getting younger and younger.

Six of Dr. Judkins' recent patients were under age 32, and the youngest was 27.

All were smokers.

There are many resources available to men and women who are serious about making needed lifestyle changes leading to a healthier heart.

Dr. Judkins cited public information programs through national organizations such as the American Heart Association (AHA), education programs through the Wellness Center at Glens Falls Hospital with which Adirondack Cardiology is affiliated, and patient information at physicians' offices.

He also recommended checking out Web sites such as www.webmd.com that have valid information.

But he warned, "Stick with the credible Web sites. Some just want to sell you something."

The American Heart Association has a Web site, www.americanheart.org, which gives guidelines for an individual's good, bad and total cholesterol levels, triglycerides, blood pressure and body mass index.

There are links to a no-fad diet for safe and personalized weight control, dietary recommendations from medical and nutrition experts to help lower cholesterol levels, and even a guide to shopping for healthier foods. These are just a handful of the hundreds of resources available on this comprehensive site.

Every February, National Heart Month, branches of the American Heart Association all over the country sponsor a variety of "Go Red" events to raise awareness about heart health among women, as well as to raise funds to further the work of AHA.

"Heart disease and stroke are still thought of as an old man's disease," said Jeff Foley, communications director for the Albany branch of the American Heart Association.

In truth, one out of every two and a half women in the US is affected by heart disease, he said.

"Everyone has a family member or friend who has been a victim of heart attack or stroke," said Foley. "But women tend to put others first. If they and their husbands and even kids were better educated about the signs of heart disease, maybe Mom could have gotten to the emergency room sooner."

So women have to dedicate time to educate themselves, and this year's Go Red campaign may have helped hundreds of thousands of women get this needed education.

"In 2004 more than 95,000 women registered for the program, and in just January and February of 2005 alone there were 190,000 registrants," said Foley.

The program is designed to familiarize women with all the warning signs of heart disease through quizzes and information gathering on the AHA Web site.

"Go Red is the first step in good heart health," said Foley. "Women often don't know what their risk factors are."

This year's Albany-area campaign officially started when Nipper, the two-

ton dog atop the Arnoff Moving and Storing Company building on Broadway downtown, "went red" and made the nightly news.

On Wear Red Day, employees from 300 participating companies from Glens Falls to Albany donated \$5 and received a red dress pin, the national logo of the Go Red campaign, and educational materials.

"The Ridge Goes Red" was held at Maple Ski Ridge in Schenectady, helping raise awareness among 30 teams of skiing and snowboarding high school students who competed throughout the night.

There was also a Kick-Off Celebration to a Heart Healthy Life networking and educational event for women.

Foley expressed his appreciation for the hundreds of volunteers, including physicians and envelope-stuffers and even red-clad news anchors, who made the annual event a success.

But success is best measured by the lives saved through increased awareness.

The American Heart Association recommends quitting smoking and combating inactivity by exercising 30 minutes a day.

All physical activity adds up to a healthier heart — swimming, cycling, jogging, skiing, aerobic dancing, walking or any of dozens of other activities included in a structured exercise program or just part of a daily routine, according to the AHA Web site.

The AHA also reports that people who have too much body fat are more likely to develop heart disease and stroke even if they have no other risk factors. Obesity is linked with coronary heart disease mainly because it raises blood

pressure and blood cholesterol and can cause the onset of diabetes.

Dr. Judkins said that this high blood cholesterol leads to "rusty pipes."

"The rust that builds up in your plumbing is the equivalent of cholesterol build-up in the body," said Dr. Judkins. "Stroke and heart disease come from this same path."

Dr. Judkins came to Adirondack Cardiology in 1998, a practice founded 35 years ago by Dr. James Morrissey and Dr. David Schwanker and the only cardiology group to provide in-patient care at Glens Falls Hospital.

"This allows us to provide continuity of care for patients both in and out of the hospital," he said. "Patients will see the same group of cardiologists that treated them in the hospital when they get out."

Dr. Judkins said that Adirondack Cardiology is 100% dedicated to Glens Falls Hospital and believes that patients benefit from the state-of-the-art cardiology facility at the Charles R. Wood Tower at the hospital.

"The new Tower allows us to provide care at a level that is exceptional for a community of this size," he said.

Adirondack Cardiology is located across from Glens Falls Hospital at 90 South Street. ■