

## **RISK FACTORS FOR HEART DISEASE**

Heart disease is growing in epidemic proportions, especially in India. Whereas the western world is experiencing a reduction in rates of heart disease largely as a result of public education and government regulations, we have very weak systems of food regulation, even less of public education. This, along with our traditional reliance on dairy based foods, maida, oil and ghee, when added on to our sedentary habits combine to produce a deadly milieu in which our predilection for heart disease has the opportunity to flower and express itself: The result is a doubling of prevalence of heart attacks, tripling of deaths due to heart disease, and heart disease striking in a younger population, making India the heart disease capital of the world.

What can we do to prevent this scourge from attacking us? The solution has to be personal: Understanding the factors that put us at risk is of the utmost importance so that we can pursue a healthy life and avoid one of sickness, medicines and fear that the thought of heart disease brings. The major risk factors are:

1. Diabetes
2. High Blood Pressure or Hypertension
3. Tobacco use
4. High Cholesterol
5. Physical inactivity

### **Diabetes**

Diabetes is a condition diagnosed by having a high blood sugar, but acts mostly by hastening heart disease amongst other effects. In fact most patients of Diabetes die of heart disease rather than of high blood sugar! It is imperative therefore to prevent this mostly acquired disease by controlling weight, exercising and getting a sugar check up. If you are already diabetic it is more important to reduce cholesterol and your blood pressure than to cut out sugar! Every diabetic should be aware of his cholesterol and blood pressure.

### **High Blood Pressure**

People with high blood pressure are at risk for not only developing heart attacks but are at the highest risk of paralytic stroke as well as heart failure. This is mostly a silent condition and produces symptoms only when some complication arises which is usually too late! Getting your blood pressure checked regularly is the only way to detect it. Also if you already have Hypertension, self monitoring

of your BP and adherence to the medicines prescribed will go a long way in warding off the problems described above!

### **Tobacco Use**

Cigarette, bidi, zarda, cigar and pipe smoking are all various forms of tobacco use. The health risks of tobacco are well known: it puts you at serious risk for having a heart attack if you have any other risk factors as it produces an abnormal stickiness of the blood, it constricts the arteries of the heart and may also make the cholesterol deposits more injurious to the heart arteries. Apart from this tobacco use is implicated in so many other illnesses such as lung cancers, cancers of the mouth and throat, stomach ulcers, cancers of the food pipe, stomach... the list goes on.

Tobacco has very high addictive powers and can be very difficult to give up: it replaces the neuro transmitters in the pleasure centre of the brain, forcing the user to use it ever more, as without this he cannot experience any pleasure! A potent drug indeed, forcing its addicts even if they have suffered seriously from it to continue its use! The best way is AVOID TOBACCO AT ALL COSTS.

### **High Cholesterol**

Cholesterol is an important part of our body and is used in the construction of cell membranes as well as being an important component of the brain. Excess however is bad and gets deposited in arteries of the heart, brain, legs, etc producing heart attacks, strokes, and gangrene of the legs. About half of the cholesterol which we produce in our bodies, and the remaining is through our diets. There is also a good cholesterol which mops up the circulating excess and takes it back to the liver before it gets deposited in our arteries. We should therefore, not have excess bad cholesterol which could be deposited, and at the same time try to increase our good, mopping up cholesterol.

Our diets which are rich in saturated fats such as ghee, cream butter, cheese, are the main culprits. Vanaspati, and coconut oil are two cooking mediums which should be avoided as they have very high saturated fats. Instead good oils are those which are unsaturated such as mustard, groundnut, sunflower, canola, and olive oil. The total oil intake as well as fried food intake should be limited. A big culprit are fast foods which are full of maida, saturated fats and processed foods.

### **Physical Inactivity**

A lack of physical activity predisposes us to worsen all the above risk factors (except tobacco use): indulging in regular physical exercise makes us have better blood pressure, reduces sugar levels, cuts down cholesterol, apart from making us lose weight and feel better!

Regular physical activity of about 30- 40 min daily of a nature such as brisk walking, cycling, playing a sport, or visiting a gym is immensely useful and has been proven scientifically to reduce the occurrence of heart disease. Yoga if done

properly and in a planned manner has even greater benefits, and this is also a scientific fact! So go for it : a useful saying “ he who does not find time for exercise, must find time for illness”.

Simply put, being aware of the risk factors that may lead to heart disease, modifying our habits to inculcate heart healthy ones and incorporating these in our lives as well as in the lives of our loved ones is the best way to ward off this dreaded problem.