

Heart disease numbers drop for Baby Boomers, still at high risk

BY VICKIE ASHWILL

SPECIAL TO THE HOUSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

An overweight nation used to eating fatty, salty and sugary foods has continued to keep heart disease the No. 1 cause of death in the U.S. — despite the massive amounts of information available, experts say.

For Baby Boomers — born 1946 to 1964 — the number is getting better, but heart disease is still the No. 2 cause of death for that age bracket, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The death rate by heart attack for Baby Boomers declined by 25 percent from 1997 to 2007. Experts say it may mean we're eating better and moving slightly more than our parents, but not enough.

"We are making serious headway," said Dr. Stephanie Coulter, cardiologist and the director of the Center for Women's Heart and Vascular Health at the Texas Heart Institute at St. Luke's Hospital. "Half (of the improvements) are due to prevention. Half is due to improved therapy."

Coulter credits the 40 percent decline in mortality rates for diabetics for part of the drop in deaths from heart disease. Diabetics are one of the highest-risk groups for cardiac events, she said.

However, there are still 1 million heart attacks in the U.S. every year, said Dr. Chi C. Mao, chairman and founder of Advanced Life Wellness Institute Inc., which opened in Houston June 27. Mao is also the chief medical officer of Select Specialty Hospitals in Houston.

"Twenty percent never make it to the hospital," he said. "Obviously, this is quite significant."

Continuing to lower the risk for heart disease is basic — lifestyle is 60 percent of how long you live, said Coulter. Genetics is 20 to 30 percent.

"It's never too late to make changes."



Coulter



Mao

Smoking continues to be a top factor in heart disease deaths, according to the American Heart Association.

While the smoking rate has declined 42.4 percent in adults over the age of 18 since 1965, the rate of decline has slowed, dropping from 20.9 percent in 2005 to 19.3 percent in 2010, according to the CDCP.

More Baby Boomers are more likely to see a doctor for an annual visit — therefore they are more likely to keep their cholesterol and blood pressure in check, said Coulter.

Many more people are taking cholesterol drugs, which stop the existing plaque from breaking off and moving through the veins, she said. But, "there are no medications that make plaque go away."

Mao said advancements in medicine and technology have helped lower the death risk from heart disease.

"But we're chasing it from behind. We allow the body to create disease, and we have to spend money on the sick body."

It's contributing to rising health costs, he said.

"Most people ignore or are ignorant about the risk factors," said Mao.

"By the time the body tells you that you should go see a doctor, many times it is too late. We are not talking about health care then, we are talking about disease care."

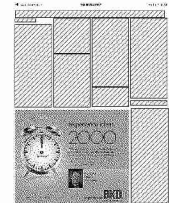
EAT RIGHT, EXERCISE

Weight and lack of mobility are two of the top risks associated with heart disease and leading factors for a cardiovascular event such as heart attack or blood clots.

"Houston is a fat and non-active city," Coulter said. "But there are people interested in lifestyle modification and it's the Baby Boomer class. They know they should exercise ..., at least they are trying."

Cardiovascular disease is 90 percent preventable, she said. People just need to take steps to improve their lives.

"Exercise helps the blood vessels be healthy," said Coulter, noting that it reduces the chance for diabetes by 57 percent.



UNDERSTANDING THE RISKS

Coulter also touts eating smaller portions and unprocessed food as healthy habits to pick up.

Excuses for not eating right or exercising are rampant, and doctors know it.

“We know what excuses people have — I don’t have time, I have to work,” said Mao. “Oftentimes, they have plenty of time before work or after. It’s human nature (to make excuses.)”

Coulter said adults need 150 minutes of cardiovascular exercise a week or 30 minutes a day.

“Yoga and pilates don’t count,” she said.

The added benefit is that exercise is a good treatment for stress as well.

“Go out and run,” Coulter said. “It works for me.”

Mao said overweight people are typically malnourished. They fill their bodies with calories but they are missing critical nutrients such as vitamins and minerals, he said.

“It makes a vicious cycle. The body can’t get critical nutrients, and the body runs down.”

Mao said supplements, which are controversial to some in the medical field, are sometimes needed. He said even fresh foods shipped from long distances are less nutritious than food raised locally.

The key to lowering your risk is lifestyle modification, said Coulter. Sixty percent of the population is in the intermediate risk group for heart disease.

“The key is to get yourself lower in that category. It’s where prevention and modification are important.”

And, don’t forget the baby aspirin, she said.

“It reduces the chance of dying from a heart attack by 25 percent. The intermediate risk group probably needs a baby aspirin a day.” ■

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WHAT THE NUMBERS SAY

Death rates for cardiovascular disease are declining for Baby Boomers, according to 2007 numbers from CDCP and the American Heart Association.

- For the 40- to 59-year-old age group, 6 percent of men and 6 percent of women have cardiovascular disease; 1.9 percent of men and 0.8 percent of women have heart failure.
- For the 60- to 79-year-old group, 22.8 percent of men and 13.9 percent of women have cardiovascular disease; 9 percent of men and 5.4 percent of women have heart failure.
- In adults, total cholesterol levels of 240 milligrams per deciliter or higher are considered high risk; 200 to 239 mg/dL are considered borderline high risk. Among Americans ages 45 to 54, 19.8 percent of men and 18.6 percent of women have total blood cholesterol levels of 240 mg/dL or higher. Among Americans ages 55 to 64, 16.2 percent of men and 27.1 percent of women have levels of 240 mg/dL or higher.
- Obesity numbers remain high. For ages 45-54, 35.9 percent of men and 39.1 percent of women are obese. For ages 55 to 64, 40.4 percent of men and 42.4 of women are obese.

SIGNS OF A HEART ATTACK

The American Heart Association advises for heart disease symptoms that come on quickly and last more than a few minutes to call 911. Those include:

- Chest discomfort in the center of the chest that goes away and comes back and feels like squeezing, pressure, fullness or pain
- Shortness of breath, with or without heart pain
- Other signs may include breaking out in a cold sweat, being nauseous or lightheaded