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REDUCE THE RISK

Lately I've had many people ask me what specifically they can do to lower their risk for heart disease, and in particular how to avoid heart attacks and strokes. These questions are not just coming from my patients in their 60's and 70's – they're increasingly being asked by patients in their 40's and 50's, some even younger. This is great news for the message of prevention and early detection that cardiologists have been trying to get out for decades.

As our technological capabilities for treating cardiovascular disease continues to grow, we also know that the more involved people are in their own health, the better the outcome and quality of their lives. Patients I see who have been smokers, type-2 diabetics, overweight, stressed are now increasingly aware that their lifestyle (and often genetic predisposition) has increased their risk for disease sooner than later in life.

So what do you do if you're a man in your 40's, with high blood pressure, and one or more parents had a cardiac event? Or a woman in her 50's with elevated triglycerides who smoke? The challenge to you and your physician is to work together to reduce risk. I say this because cardiovascular disease remains the number one killer in the United States. One in every three deaths is due to heart attack or strokes, according to the CDC.

Generally speaking you should get annual check-ups in your twenties, and make sure you have knowledge of cholesterol levels, blood pressure, weight, and BMI. The broader the reference point for your doctor the better if things significantly change with your health. Though genetics play a key role in the disease process, studies show that about 90% of cardiovascular risk is due to smoking, high cholesterol and blood pressures, physical activity and diet – all factors subject to a patient's control.

As you age, follow your doctor's recommendations for testing and medications. A man in his 40's will be at risk for different things than the average 25-year-old, and should alter his thinking and treatment in accordance with age.

Medication development and technological breakthroughs have allowed patients the ability to better live their lives by bolstering their defense against high blood pressure, clogged arteries, arrhythmias, etc. It's vastly improved doctor's ability to improve patients' lives and reduced risk by expanding the amount of "tools in the toolbox." For example, if one drug doesn't work for a patient, there are more and more options. If one procedure is ruled out, often there's another that might work better. There's always reason to stay optimistic about your health.

President Clinton is an example of a man who had cardiac problems, kicked some bad habits, radically changed his diet (he's now vegan), and has changed his health for the better.

Where do you start? At the beginning. Work with a physician to see where you are, what you may be at risk for, given your personal health. I urge patients to keep an eye on their risk factors and symptoms, some of which may not be problem right now but are waiting for them in a few years. Be the one you rely on to make your health your highest priority and do your best to surround yourself with those who support and motivate your wellness.

Listen to Dr. Galichia's Radio Show – "Take Your Health to Heart" every Saturday from 11 AM to Noon on 1480 KQAM in Wichita. If you have any medically related questions, please call us during the LIVE broadcast at 1-800-TALK-997 or 1-800-825-5997. You can also e-mail your questions anytime to

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