Heart Health: It's All About Your Weight

Carrying around extra body weight can have serious health consequences. Those pounds translate into a major risk factor for heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, and stroke. While people may understand the link between heart attacks and obesity intellectually, they may not fully comprehend the risk they are taking by remaining overweight.

What Are the Consequences for My Heart?

Overweight people are susceptible to heart disease because of the high level of fat in their system. High cholesterol and high triglycerides can cause deposits on the walls of the arteries. Blocked arteries limit blood flow and are a major cause of heart disease, heart attack, and stroke. An obese person also has a greater chance of developing hypertension or high blood pressure. Untreated high blood pressure will cause the heart to overwork. Over time, that extra burden on the heart weakens the heart muscle and arteries. Scarring and hardening of the arteries from high blood pressure narrows the arteries and limits blood flow to the heart and other body organs.

What Is My Ideal Weight?

The first step toward insuring a healthy heart is maintaining an appropriate body weight. One-third of the U.S. population is 20% or more above their ideal weight. A person's "ideal" weight is a healthy weight for their height. A good indicator of a healthy weight is the "body mass index" or BMI, which takes into account both weight and height.

BMI is an assessment tool used to screen and determine risk factors for health problems. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website (http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/dnpabmi/Calculator.aspx) has a BMI calculator for adults and children. Adults with a BMI of 25 to 29.9 are considered overweight. An adult BMI of 30 or above indicates obesity. Both of these categories are associated with increased health risks.

Another good indicator of heart disease risk is waist measurement. A waist circumference of 40 inches or greater for men (35 inches or greater for women) indicates excess abdominal fat, which translates into an increased risk for heart disease.

Healthy Lifestyle

Obesity is mainly caused by taking in (eating and drinking) more calories than are used up during physical activity. The path to a healthier heart starts with making lifestyle changes that will help shed extra pounds. This means not only eating less but also eating better, and developing a healthy exercise regimen.

Permanent weight loss comes from making permanent lifestyle changes. The best way to lose weight is by eating a balanced, low fat, high fiber diet and getting 30 minutes of daily physical activity.

Any weight loss—even 10 to 15 pounds—can significantly reduce the health risks associated with being overweight.

For more information visit the following websites:

http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/adult_BMI/about_adult_BMI.htm#Interpreted

http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=4639

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