

Quenching the Fires of Heart Disease

Inflammation and Heart Health

Summer was the busiest and best season for Ken, the owner of a small-engine repair shop. But Ken's long hours and hectic schedule were interrupted—permanently. At age 46, overweight and a smoker, Ken's first symptom of heart trouble was his last—he fell victim to a sudden, fatal heart attack. Ken had been sure he was fine. He had never had chest pain or shortness of breath.

Ken's story is not uncommon. Although heart attacks occur when arteries become narrowed by cholesterol, this occurs less than 30 percent of the time.¹ Instead, most heart attacks and many strokes originate from small but unstable fatty deposits in arteries called plaques. When they rupture, they release deadly compounds that can produce life-threatening clots.

Although arteries have often been compared to ordinary plumbing pipes, these vessels are much more complex than simple pipes. Arteries are living tissues that contain powerful chemicals involved in immune function, inflammation, clotting, and more.²

The most common disease of these living tissues is atherosclerosis, once called “hardening of the arteries.” But it actually involves more than “hardening” (sclerosis). Atherosclerosis also involves a “mushy,” fat component. In fact, the process begins when fats (such as cholesterol) move from the blood into the lining of the blood vessels. These fatty deposits are a part of an inflammation process which causes a greater risk for heart attack and stroke.

When working correctly, acute (short-term) inflammation causes the body's immune system to heal when injuries have occurred. But chronic (long-term) over activation of the immune system can cause serious problems. Such is the case in diseases such as lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, and asthma. It is also true in atherosclerosis.

Inflammation literally means “on fire.” Indeed, scientists now realize chronic inflammation is a major—if not *the* major—culprit in coronary artery disease. It underlies not only the creation of fatty plaques but also their growth and rupture.

Is there anything we can do to dampen the fires of inflammation in our bodies? Fortunately for our arteries, the answer is a resounding “yes.” Lifestyle choices can have a major effect on the inflammation process involved in heart disease.

Here are a few timely tips for keeping your “ticker” in top shape, reducing inflammation and sudden heart attack risk while improving heart health—naturally!

- 1. Stop the Smokes.** Smoking as few as two cigarettes a day significantly increases inflammation throughout your body.³ Smoking robs your heart of oxygen. Quitting dramatically reduces your risk of heart attack.⁴
- 2. Ditch the drinks and enjoy water.** Sugary drinks fuel belly fat, which stokes the fires of inflammation linked not only with heart disease, but also diabetes, obesity, and certain cancers. This is because the fat carried around our bellies is metabolically active, producing chemicals that heighten inflammation throughout the body. The top source of added sugar in the United States population is sweetened drinks.⁵ Losing even small amounts of excess weight reduce heart attack, cancer, and diabetes risk. Ditch sugary drinks and enjoy fresh, pure water and soothing herbal teas. Aim for 8-10 cups of water each day.
- 3. Shop Defensively.** The produce department has been called “the Department of Defense” when it comes to disease prevention. Spend more time shopping in the fruit and vegetable aisles and fill up your cart and your body with these foods to dramatically lower inflammation throughout your body. In general, animal products tend to fan the flames of inflammation while plant foods dampen them. Increase omega-3 fats with mineral-rich walnuts, chia or ground flax seed.
- 4. Get in “D” Sun.** Low levels of vitamin D, the “sunshine” vitamin, are connected with increased risk of heart disease. Enjoy outdoor time in the sun responsibly. You may need to supplement.
- 5. Move it and Lose it.** Lack of physical exercise is second only to smoking as a risk factor for heart disease. Daily exercise is linked to lower cholesterol levels, improved blood pressure, better diabetes control, improved mood and sleep, and fewer joint problems.
- 6. Stack Those “ZZZs”.** Lack of sleep increases heart attack risk. Tone down the intensity of evening activities; avoid caffeine, alcohol, and heavy meals at night, and your sleep quality will improve. Guard your bedtime—it is healing time.

7. Watch Your Mouth. Gum diseases which cause inflammation are linked with bacterial infections that can contribute to heart disease. Also, heart disease, obesity, and diabetes increase the risk of gum problems. Daily flossing and brushing, avoidance of soda pop, and enjoying a diet rich in plant foods helps your mouth as well as your heart.

8. Mind Your Matters. Scientists have found a compelling link between stress and inflammation. Although we can't always control the things that come at us, we can often learn better ways to cope. Take time to unwind by spending more time with friends and family. Trim your schedule and add daily time with God in Bible study and prayer.

The Living Word

God Cares about Your Heart. God speaks of the heart as more than an organ that pumps blood. The Bible uses the heart to represent the springboard of our actions and the seat of our emotions. **“Give me your heart, and let your eyes take delight in my ways.” Proverbs 23:26.** Would you allow Jesus Christ—the God of all healing, comfort, and love—to help you form new habits and renew your inner life? You can start today—one choice at a time—and gain more optimal health while “losing” needless suffering!

Visit us at LifestyleMatters.com or call 1-866-624-5433 for your resources to build a better brain, body, and lifestyle.

¹ AJM Jan 2009: S10.

² Heart Health in the Inflammation Age. Peter Libby. Scientific American Presents: Oral and Whole Body Health. Special publication by Proctor and Gamble, 2006.

³ Respir Res. 2005; 6(1): 22.

⁴ Evidence-based Medicine 2004(9):28.

⁵ Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP)