

When Heart Disease Runs in the Family

Protect your ticker by understanding the role of family history

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ACCORDING TO THE World Heart Federation, if a first-degree male relative (father/brother) has suffered a heart attack before the age of 55, or if a first-degree female relative has suffered one before the age of 65, you are at greater risk of developing heart disease. If both parents have suffered from heart disease before the age of 55, your risk of developing heart disease can rise by 50 per cent compared to the general population. So, if heart disease runs in your family, your risk is higher. However, it's not a fait accompli.

I see numerous patients with poor family histories who still have healthy hearts, and I have patients with good family histories who have severe heart disease.

There are certain heart conditions that run in families. These include cardiomyopathies that affect the physical structure of the heart and its ability to pump blood effectively; arrhythmias or heart rhythm problems; and certain structural problems of the aorta, the largest artery in the body. You have little control over these and will need treatment to tackle them.

When it comes to coronary artery disease (CAD), you may inherit a gene or a cluster of genes that will make you more likely to have bad cholesterol. In fact, there is a genetic disorder that results in high levels of the kind of small, dense LDL particles. Then there is a rare genetic abnormality known as familial hypercholesterolemia (FH) that results in abnormally high levels of low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C).

Here's what you can do to take charge of your heart health.

Trace Your Family History

CAD may not throw up symptoms to begin with, so it's crucial that you are aware if there's a family history of high cholesterol, early heart disease or heart attacks. Remember that it's not just the health of your parents that influences your risk-the health of your siblings matters too.

According to a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, having a brother or sister with cardio-vascular disease significantly increases the risk of developing coronary heart disease. Why? Because not only do siblings have similar genes, but they also ate similar food and grew up in the same environment, all of which have a telling impact. This will help develop a plan to reduce risk factors before heart disease sets in or catch it early to manage it well before it spirals out of control.

Know Your Numbers

Get your blood pressure, lipid profile and blood sugar tested regularly, as advised by your physician. Because the age at which people get heart disease is coming down, it's advisable to get tested as early as age 18, or earlier if at risk. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics also recommends that if a family has a pattern of heart attacks or heart disease in men before age 55 or in women before age 65, children in that family should undergo cholesterol testing as early as age 2 and before age 10.

Eat a Heart-Healthy Diet

This means consuming minimal saturated fat (like whole dairy and butter), no trans fats (found in bakery products), fewer processed meats and more leafy greens, fruits, whole grains and fish.

Quit Smoking

Smoking dramatically increases your chances of developing cardio-vascular disease. Steer clear of second hand smoke, too.

Get Regular Exercise

Aim for at least 30 minutes of cardiovascular exercise (walking, running or cycling) on most days of the week-the kind that gets your heart rate up. Exercise can help you manage your weight and cut down the risk.

Control Your Blood Sugar

If you have diabetes, it's essential to take medication and follow the advice to keep your blood sugar under control.

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