

EVALUATING YOUR RISK FACTORS

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We are all familiar with taking risks in life. As children who could jump across a puddle or a ditch or as high schoolers whose car will go the fastest or accelerate the best are early ways that we take risks. We take risks when we visit someone who is sick with an unknown infectious illness and the possibility that we might catch it. We also increase our risk factor by eating too much food, eating too little food, eating the wrong kind of food, and not analyzing and supplementing our specific nutritional needs.

Failure to control stress is another form of risk which may indeed be very costly to us if we are unable to develop mechanisms to do this. In a recent article on atrial fibrillation and other cardiac arrhythmias which I have read, it was noted that stronger risk factors included emotional or work related stress, physical over-exertion (not exertion), caffeine, alcohol, and ice cold drinks. With stress and anxiety being high on the list and having the ability to cause such significant debilitating and even deadly cardiac problems, it would serve us well to learn how to control our stress level and also our anxiety level associated with that.

It was also found that patients with atrial fibrillation and other cardiac arrhythmias had a significantly higher mean life acute stress score during the week preceding the first episode when compared with a control group. More than three cups of espresso a day made it three times more likely to develop cardiac arrhythmia than those just drinking two cups a day.

There is a high risk level with an increased BMI (body mass index, especially greater than 30) which we know is related to heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. However, it was also related to a 61% increase in the risk of experiencing a first episode of atrial fibrillation. In one study, they showed no relation between moderate alcohol consumption, chocolate intake, or level of physical activity. However, excessive involvement in these does increase the risk factor as shown by other studies. Also interesting is the fact that there was an increase in coffee consumption noted after a stressful event which would, of course, tend to perpetuate or make worse the already established effects of the stress which the person was experiencing.

While we assess our personal risks which can change our personal lives, we do need to look at all of the risk factors. For this discussion, I will discuss the ones which affect our health, well-being, and longevity. First, we must assess our health status and our lifestyle which influences it. If you have a genetic disposition to heart disease, diabetes, stroke, or other known diseases, you are actually increasing your risk with these unless you take each one separately and deal with it, on an individual risk basis.

Take heart disease, for example. If the strong risk is there, changing to a low-fat diet may not be enough. You may need to have very close analysis of your cholesterol profile to help predict your risk factors or you may need a stress test or calcium scan of your heart. You need to further lower your risk by taking a magnesium supplement if your serum level is low. Many people in this country (nearly 90%) have a low magnesium level because the vegetables and foods which we eat are not as nutritious as in past years when more of it was grown naturally. If you were to have a coronary thrombosis, death is usually from cardiac “arrhythmia, and is markedly decreased when magnesium levels are normal.

By pursuing information on your cardiac status, you can better determine your risk. A calcium scan of the heart is not a routine test for everyone, but it seems to do a better job of predicting cardiac disease than a stress test. If calcium levels in the heart vessels are high, then further analysis in the form of coronary angiography may be indicated. If you find and treat a potential coronary blockage, you have effectively lowered your risk of cardiac death significantly.

Waiting for cancer to show symptoms and signs may be another form of increasing your risk. Routine mammograms, colonoscopies, fecal blood tests, monitoring your weight pattern, PSA testing, routine chest x-rays and pap smears combined with an annual pelvic exam also decreases your risk by allowing earlier intervention in the treatment of these potential problems. In addition to these tests, another one which is too expensive for a universal screening test – total body CT scan – is used by some to look for any potential tumors or masses which cannot be picked up by the routine screening tests. Although you must personally pay for this and there is some additional radiation exposure, many people use this test every few years to reduce the risk potential of missing a tumor when it could be successfully treated.

Overall, everything we face in life can increase our risk of disease or premature death. All risk factors can be assessed by analysis and treatment as indicated, and we can achieve our normal (and beyond) life expectancy and arrive at that point in better health than we would have if we just let it all happen naturally. The risk of cancer, heart disease, accidents, sports injuries, degenerative diseases, and nutritional problems can all be reduced if we are proactive in our assessment of these, sometimes to the point of raising the issue with our primary care physicians. No one can be as strong an advocate for reducing your risk factors as you personally can. So, be aware of all risks which are potentially injurious to your health and well-being, and try to avoid them.