

Healthy LIVING**Heart disease - reducing the risks** By Mark Atkinson

Cardiovascular disease is the biggest cause of death across the globe. Yet 80 percent of heart-related deaths could be avoided by making a few lifestyle changes. What are the main causes of heart disease and what steps can be taken to avoid it?



always speculative. What is known, he continues, is that in line with global trends, heart attack is the UAE's number one killer.

This is perhaps not surprising when considering how endemic some of the main causes of CVD are in the UAE. The latest available figures from Dubai, as supplied by Dr. Kumar, show that 25 percent of the population is diabetic, while 33 percent suffer from hypertension (high blood pressure). This later figure compares with 14 percent in the USA and 27 percent in Europe - although the UK is higher at 31 percent.

Stress (the precursor to hypertension) is a well-known aspect of

According to the most recent World Health Organisation (WHO) statistics, cardiovascular disease (CVD) claims 16.7 million lives per year. That is 29 percent of all deaths globally. In the UAE, figures published in the media vary from 28 percent to as high as 41 percent. In truth, offers Dr. Anil Kumar, head of cardiology at Belhoul Speciality Hospital in Dubai, the figures are

UAE life - where everything is expected yesterday and where six and seven day weeks and late evenings in the workplace are often the norm. In terms of our physical fitness, Dr. Kumar refers to what he coins the 'Dubai-Sharjah Syndrome', "Where," he explains, "the only exercise many people get is between the accelerator and the brake (hypertension levels in Sharjah are even higher than Dubai

at 36 percent of the population).” The high number of smokers still prevalent in Dubai is also a major contributor to heart disease. Of even greater concern is the growing number of heart attacks amongst younger people in the city. This is largely attributed to many of the above lifestyle traits.

What causes heart disease?

CVD is a generic term for any condition related to the heart. A muscle measuring roughly the size of a fist, the heart beats around 70 times per minute and is responsible for pumping blood around the body. Travelling first to the lungs where it is oxygenated, the blood eventually returns to the heart where it is pumped out again in a process called circulation.

The most common cardiovascular condition - and the most usual cause of heart attack - is coronary heart disease. The coronary arteries are the blood vessels on the surface of the heart that provide its blood supply. Coronary heart disease is the build up of fatty deposits known as ‘atheroma’, which block the artery walls and restrict the blood supply. This in turn can lead to angina (chest pain, particularly when exerting oneself - walking up a hill for example), heart attack and stroke. The likelihood of developing atherosclerosis (the build up of atheroma) is increased in smokers, those with high blood pressure or cholesterol levels, or by not taking regular exercise. Also more prone to atherosclerosis are those with thrombosis or diabetes, being overweight, or having a family history of the condition. The risk also increases with age.

Atheroma in the arteries of the neck can also lead to a stroke, where a restriction in the supply of blood to the brain may cause certain physical disabilities or affect mental processes. The effects of a stroke vary enormously in their severity from the temporary symptoms of a minor stroke, to more severe and permanent damage.

Other less common heart problems include congenital conditions - where, for example, the heart valves may not open or close

properly, ‘cardiomyopathy’ - where the heart muscle is abnormally enlarged or thickened, or heart rhythm disorders such as an ‘ectopic’ (extra) beat of the heart. Coronary heart disease however, is infinitely the most common.

Heart attack - diagnosis and treatment

A significant blockage of the coronary artery is the cause of heart attack. Heart attacks, like strokes, can vary greatly in their severity - it is thought that 20 percent go undiagnosed. Symptoms of a heart attack may include central chest pain (which again may vary from severe pain to mild discomfort and also spread to the arms, jaw and neck), sweatiness, dizziness and nausea.

“The symptoms of a heart attack can be similar to indigestion,” says NHS Direct. “For example, they may include a feeling of heaviness in your chest, a stomach ache, or heartburn. A heart attack can happen at any time, including while you are resting. If the symptoms last longer than 15 minutes, it is probably a heart attack.”

Crucially, if you think that you, or someone you are with, may be having a heart attack, call 999 immediately. Initial treatment offered by the medical services might include CPR (cardio-pulmonary resuscitation), and a 300mg (one tablet) dose of aspirin to prevent the coronary blockage from getting bigger. Chewing or dissolving the aspirin will allow it to enter the bloodstream quicker. Other treatments include ‘thrombolysis’, also known as ‘clot busters’, which are injected into the bloodstream, or a ‘coronary angioplasty’ - a surgical procedure to widen the coronary artery. This is done by inserting a tube that pushes against the artery walls.

Following a heart attack, medication may include ‘beta blockers’ - which slow down the heartbeat and reduce its workload, and ‘ACE inhibitors’ - that open the blood vessels and reduce blood pressure. One may often make a full recovery and be able to return to normal life within weeks or months - depending on the nature of one’s occupation.



For many however, it will also mean making some significant and permanent changes in diet and lifestyle. Some of the medications prescribed following a heart attack may also have to be taken indefinitely.

Reducing the risks

According to the World health organisation (WHO), at least 80 percent of deaths related to both stroke and heart disease could be avoided through not smoking, being physically active and maintaining a healthy, balanced diet. The Mediterranean diet in particular is widely considered an excellent way to keeping the heart healthy. As recommended by NHS direct, this involves replacing butter with olive oil and polyunsaturated spreads, replacing red meats with poultry and eating more wholegrain bread. One should also eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day and two to four portions of oily fish each week - such as mackerel, herrings and sardines. Contained within oily fish is the fatty acid, Omega-3, which lowers blood pressure and reduces the risk of 'arrhythmias' (abnormal heart rhythms).

The Mediterranean diet also helps to reduce the risk of other conditions, say reports. One recent international report in particular suggests that it may reduce the risk of all types of cancer by six percent and the likelihood of both Alzheimer's and Parkinson's by as much as 13 percent.

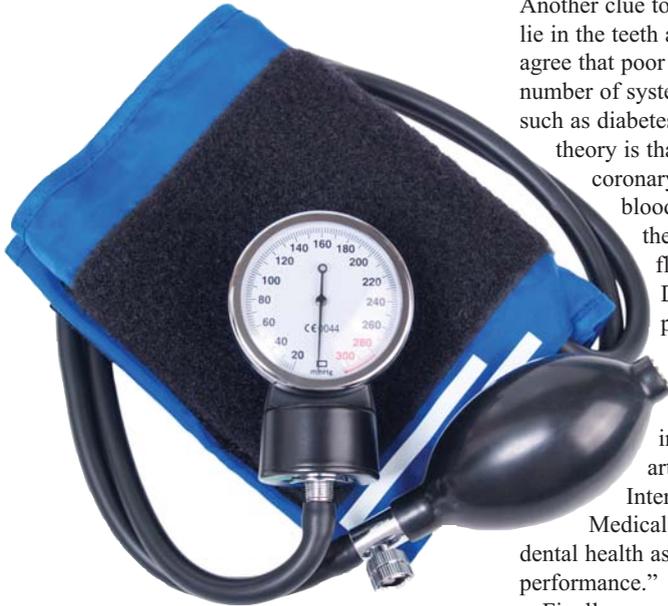
Cut down on high cholesterol and fatty foods such as fast food, cheese, cakes and biscuits, adds NHS Direct. Also, instead of frying or roasting your food, grill, poach or steam it. Reducing one's salt intake will also help reduce blood pressure and the risk of



heart attack. Keep alcohol consumption within the recommended limits of three to four units a day for men and two to three for women. While alcohol itself is not a direct cause of heart disease, it is a cause of high pressure and cholesterol. As a guideline, one unit equals around half a pint of beer, a small glass of wine or a single pub measure of spirits.

In terms of physical activity, one should be aiming for at least 20 to 30 minutes of exercise per day - sufficient to make you slightly breathless.

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Another clue to keeping the heart healthy may lie in the teeth and gums. Many experts now agree that poor dental hygiene is linked to a number of systemic inflammatory diseases, such as diabetes, CVD and strokes. One

theory is that oral bacteria may enter the coronary arteries through the bloodstream, attach themselves to the artery walls and restrict blood flow. Dr. Souheil Hussaini, a Dubai-based specialist in prosthodontics and implant surgery concurs, "The bacteria that cause periodontal (gum) disease can also trigger an immune response causing arteries to swell. This is why the International Olympic Committee Medical Commission promotes good dental health as a way of improving athletic performance."

For those averse to playing sports, jogging or the gym, a brisk walk is extremely beneficial. Even at work, "moving around, stretching and changing position regularly all help to keep the body mobile and strong," adds the British Heart Foundation (BHF). Take regular opportunities to move around, BHF suggests - at least every 30 minutes. Where possible, climb the stairs instead of taking the lift. Take the opportunity to walk to lunch, or organise a walking meeting. Park your car further away from your place of work - or if possible, walk or cycle to work instead.

A healthy diet and exercise regimen will also help in combating stress. In addition, as hard as it may sometimes seem to balance one's time when faced with a hectic work schedule, take the time to unwind. "Try letting something go," advises BHF. "Are there any low priority activities you can stop doing to make time for your health?"

Finally, a regular medical check at least once a year will help you monitor your general health, including blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and ECG (electrocardiogram) tests which check any possible damage to the heart. True to say, many health insurance policies may not provide cover for general medical checks - but it is an investment that might just save your life.

