

PREVENTATIVE CARDIOLOGY

Most people feel compelled to change after a life threatening disaster. It is easier to motivate someone to think about tobacco cessation, regular exercise, and dieting after that person endures the vulnerability of a heart attack or sees a close relative die from a heart problem. Although it is better to stay out of trouble than to get out of trouble, it is certainly more fun to get into trouble, eating recklessly and avoiding exercising. The challenge for physicians is learning how to help motivate their patients and their patients' families to live a healthy lifestyle.

The first issue is understanding your risk factors. Most of my patients were unaware that they had high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes until they were diagnosed with coronary disease and had a thorough evaluation. We know that there are updated guidelines for defining hypertension or high blood pressure. It is a fallacy that it is normal to have a high blood pressure as one gets older. It is true that hypertension increases in prevalence with age and that as many as 75% of women may have hypertension by age 70. Furthermore, what is considered a normal blood pressure is getting lower and lower. High cholesterol is another misunderstood risk factor. The newest guidelines emphasize the need to treat the bad cholesterol (or LDL) to goal, reckless of the bad to good (HDL) cholesterol ratio, which used to be emphasized. Yet there are individuals whose LDL cholesterol is not elevated who have even higher risk profiles due to high triglycerides and low good cholesterol. This profile must also be addressed. Diabetes is another elusive problem. Some of my patients fast for 2 days before their blood work, making it difficult to pick up a high sugar level. A HbA1C may be more helpful screen for patients with high sugars or strong family history for diabetes since it will reflect the average sugar control for a several month period. It is important for patients to know their numbers and how their lifestyle changes affect these numbers.

Eating a balanced, nutritious diet is challenging with all the controversies with the different diets, but the most important issue is avoiding excessive overeating. Weight reduction centers may help people have the tools for success with regular weigh ins and motivational meetings (accountability sessions). Regular exercise is a healthy habit since it reduces stress, promotes happy hormones (endorphins), burns fat and builds muscles, and improves cholesterol profile and sugar metabolism. There are structured programs that help people achieve and maintain their fitness, such as the INTERVENT program here in Wilmington. It is often easier to maintain a healthy lifestyle when there is a pleasant motivating coach behind you.

Lastly, and most importantly, minimize stress and try to do something enjoyable everyday. One of the most powerful healing drugs is happiness.

Linda P. Calhoun, MD, FACC
Wilmington Cardiology, PLLC