Globally, cardiovascular diseases are the number one cause of death and are projected to remain so. An estimated 17.5 million people died from cardiovascular disease in 2005, representing 30% of all global deaths. Of these deaths, 7.6 million were due to heart attacks and 5.7 million due to stroke. About 80% of these deaths occurred in low- and middle-income countries. If current trends are allowed to continue, by 2015 an estimated 20 million people will die from cardiovascular disease (mainly from heart attacks and strokes). According to the World Health Organization, dietary and lifestyle measures account for most of the problems with the cardiovascular system along with tobacco use (even secondhand or passive smoke). Cardio-vascular diseases include coronary heart disease (heart attacks), cerebrovascular disease, raised blood pressure (hypertension), peripheral artery disease, rheumatic heart disease, congenital heart disease and heart failure.
The heart and vascular system is one of the largest and most important body systems. Its primary functions are to deliver oxygen and vital nutrition to cells along with the removal of cellular waste products. In the average person’s lifetime, the heart will beat 2.5 billion times and pump 100,000 million gallons of blood! We need to be doing everything we can to support this process and not make it have to work any harder than it is.

**Signs and symptoms of Cardiovascular issues:**

- Often, there are no symptoms of the underlying disease of the blood vessels. A heart attack or stroke may be the first warning of underlying disease.
- Symptoms of a heart attack include: pain or discomfort in the centre of the chest; pain or discomfort in the arms, the left shoulder, elbows, jaw, or back. In addition, the person may experience difficulty in breathing or shortness of breath; feeling sick or vomiting; feeling light-headed or faint; breaking into a cold sweat; and becoming pale.
- Women are more likely to have shortness of breath, nausea, vomiting, and back or jaw pain.
- The most common symptom of a stroke is sudden weakness of the face, arm, or leg, most often on one side of the body. Other symptoms include sudden onset of: numbness of the face, arm, or leg, especially on one side of the body; confusion, difficulty speaking or understanding speech; difficulty seeing with one or both eyes; difficulty walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination; severe headache with no known cause; and fainting or unconsciousness.
- People experiencing these symptoms should seek medical care immediately.

**Diet and Cholesterol**

People often get confused about the relationship between cholesterol and heart disease and often fall into the trap of believing that if you have high cholesterol you are at greater risk of having a heart attack, therefore if you take cholesterol lowering drugs you will reduce your risk. WRONG! Cholesterol is often a ‘symptom’ of heart disease and it should be taken as a warning sign that you need to address your cardiovascular health from a dietary and lifestyle perspective. Your body lays cholesterol in the arteries to fill the cracks and gaps created by
poor collagen (often due to a vitamin C deficiency) and by damage from a buildup of homocysteine. If you remove this cholesterol you will be in a world of trouble. If you had a diet that was high in B vitamins and Vitamin C, you would likely not build up the cholesterol in the first place. Taking cholesterol lowering drugs is a bit like knocking out the warning light in the dashboard of the car that tells you it’s low on oil. You haven’t fixed the problem; you have just removed the annoying warning light! Cholesterol is that warning light. Don’t remove the cholesterol and think you have fixed the problem. You have just set yourself up for a heart attack or stroke. You need to correct the diet and supplement with Vitamin C and the B vitamins – namely B6, B12 and Folic Acid. By supplementing with these vitamins you are lowering your homocysteine level which will help to keep the arteries strong, thereby needing less cholesterol – which is essentially being made as the glue that is holding the arteries together. By testing homosysteine levels, this will give you a more accurate indication of how the cardiovascular system is holding up.

If you drastically reduce the fat in your diet (as is often recommended by doctors and dietitians) when you have high cholesterol, your body usually responds by making more cholesterol in the liver. We need a certain amount of cholesterol in our bodies at all times, to coat the nerves, to make hormones and for proper brain function. If we don’t get enough in our diet, our liver will make more to compensate. By trying to continuously lower this amount in the diet, you are causing your liver to register that it needs to make more. It will be an ongoing battle. However, if you decrease the bad fats but actually increase the good fats, like omega 3 oils, your arteries will be healthier for it. Going on a fat-free diet is extremely dangerous for your health and should never be attempted.

Avoid fats from cheese and dairy, fatty meats like bacon, sausage and fried foods as well as margarine, chips, chocolate, biscuits, pastries, pizza and ice-cream. If you eat a lot of these foods it can create a fatty buildup in the liver and arteries which is very difficult for the body to remove. An early form of fatty deposits, known as "fatty streaks", can even be found in some children younger than 10 years. These deposits get slowly worse as the person gets older. Children raised on a typical western diet are at great risk of early death from heart disease. A diet high in raw foods is one of the best things you can do for a child in the 21st century.
Rarely do genetic factors alone produce high levels of Triglycerides (less than 5 per 1000) or cholesterol (1 in 500 people). Therefore most of us cannot blame our genes for these problems and must look to change our habits instead. Even if you are genetically pre-disposed, good dietary and lifestyle decisions will still be of benefit.

If you are a smoker, these fats can oxidize and become carcinogenic creating a deadly problem. Tobacco smoke contains many heavy metals which create a lot of damage to the arteries, which the body tries to repair by laying down a layer of cholesterol. As you continue to smoke the body continues to lay more cholesterol to protect the arteries. If you are a smoker, you are a ticking time-bomb for heart problems regardless of how many you smoke and what milligrams of tar are contained in the cigarettes. Tar is one dangerous factor amongst 4000 other chemicals that are in modern day cigarettes. Remember that the tobacco that is grown today is heavily sprayed with pesticides and this remains in the cigarette when it goes to market. I don’t know of any ‘organic’ cigarettes.

Reducing the amount of table salt you use is prudent for good cardiovascular health. Table salt (sodium chloride) can cause the blood pressure to rise creating extra strain on the blood vessels. However, Sea Salt or Himalayan Salt is balanced with the whole range of minerals that our body needs and this does not strain the system or cause the blood pressure to rise. As an adult, you can safely consume up to 1/3 of a teaspoon of (grey) Celtic Sea Salt or (pink) Himalayan Salt daily with at least 2 litres of water. For children you would reduce this amount according to their body weight.

Consuming lots of sugar can create a fatty liver and cholesterol problem as it can cause hard fats to deposit on the blood vessel walls. For many health reasons we need to keep our sugar intake to an absolute minimum.

**Supplements of Benefit**

Vitamin C and B vitamins are the first step to reducing your risk of cardiovascular disease. As a nation, we consume a diet that is usually very low in these nutrients, partly because we eat a very processed diet and secondly the fresh food that we do eat, has usually travelled long distances and been stored for long periods of time so the vitamins are not longer there. When fresh fruit is picked
green, travelled across the continent and then gas ripened, it contains very little vitamins and minerals compared to what it would have if it were picked fresh and eaten immediately. Vitamin C is a natural heavy metal chelator, which means it helps your body to remove the build-up of heavy metals which we can accumulate by living in a polluted world. By supplementing even just with a multivitamin/mineral formula daily you are reducing your risk of deficiencies of these nutrients. You can undertake intravenous chelation to try and remove heavy metals or you can choose to use oral chelation supplements which are my preferred option as you are not only removing the nasties, but you are also adding much needed minerals and amino acids at the same time, which prevents further toxicity issues.

**Omega 3 oils** like fish oil can help to reduce the inflammation caused by damage to the arteries. Omega 3’s can also help to soften the hardening of the arteries (arteriosclerosis) that can occur with a poor diet and heavy metal toxicity. It is now medically accepted that fish oils provide great benefit for many different heart problems. This is great news as it helps to get these simple nutrients out to the public without people having to feel they are going against their doctors wishes by supplementing with nutrients. Unfortunately, there are still some old-fashioned doctors around who tell their patients that supplements are not necessary and are an expensive waste of money. It is a terrible shame when people are told this kind of thing by the people who are supposed to have the greatest knowledge on health. Keeping up to date with the latest research is the key here.

**Co-Enzyme Q10** is another nutrient that is gaining medical acceptance as being beneficial for heart health. Co Q10 is a component in every cell of the body except red blood cells and is found in highest quantity in the heart muscle. It is an essential part of the energy cycle of each cell and Dr Karl Folkers, from the University of Texas, found that 72% of individuals with cardiovascular ailments had a Co Q10 deficiency. Interestingly, some cholesterol lowering medications actually interfere with the body’s production of Co Q10. That certainly doesn’t seem helpful.

**Hawthorn** is an herb which has shown wonderful benefits for heart health. It has the ability to regulate the heart beat, improve peripheral circulation, stabilize collagen and is cardio protective. Hawthorn shows benefit for hypertension and is naturally high in antioxidants that protect the artery walls.
Antioxidants are important in protecting against the development of all kinds of chronic degenerative diseases such as cancer, diabetes and heart disease. They are also thought to slow the aging process. Fats and cholesterol are particularly susceptible to free radical damage and when damaged, form toxic derivatives known as ‘lipid peroxides’ and ‘oxidized cholesterol’ causing damage to the artery walls. Damaged walls trigger the proliferation of cholesterol to repair the problem, creating an ongoing cycle. Antioxidants block the formation of these damaging compounds creating a reduction of cholesterol deposition. A combination of antioxidants creates more benefit in this regard than any single antioxidant. Nutrients such as Vitamin C, E, Beta-carotene, Pine Bark Extracts and Grape Seed are excellent.

Magnesium is becoming a popular nutrient with Cardio surgeons for the prevention of further myocardial events. Many studies indicate that when heart attack patients supplement with magnesium, the rate of secondary infarctions decreases dramatically. Since magnesium causes the muscles to relax, it would seem prudent to make sure we have adequate magnesium throughout our lifetime to prevent the first myocardial event taking place. Many people do not survive their first heart attack, so why take the risk when a few supplements could make all the difference.

Stress will cause almost any health situation to worsen. Stress can be silent killer because it is something that creeps up without most people realizing. It places a huge strain on the physical system and contributes to vitamin and mineral deficiencies. These deficiencies cause the breakdown of collagen and the build-up of homocysteine. It is wise to find your own way of reducing stress as everyone is very different. Some people will find that going for a run will help them de-stress and others will find that relaxing in a bath with a good book works better. The point is we all need to find what suits us best.

Another major point to consider is that these modern day illnesses like CVD, diabetes and cancer are all inflammatory in nature. There are many things that create this inflammation such as pollution, chemical absorption via our skin and lungs, food allergies, parasites and junk food diets. If we take steps to reduce each of these issues in our life, we are making major progress towards remaining healthy for the long haul. Given that these steps are not hard to implement,
there really is no good reason why we have over 1/3 of the population dying of heart disease and many more dying from cancer and diabetes. I believe that education is the key to making better choices, because until we are informed, we are not even aware that there are choices to make. Seek continual education on health. You only have one body to last the distance; you need to make sure it doesn’t wear out before your time.

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