

### It Really Does Happen

I had forgotten my phone in the house before heading off to work. It was a beautiful spring morning last May, so I put the car in park in the driveway and dashed into the house to grab it. It was obvious the tone in the house had changed as I entered and found Jim was changing out of his work shirt. He was speaking slowly "I think I need to head up home. My sister just called. Mom's been up all night throwing up. We think she might be having a heart attack." Jim's mother was not having typical symptoms of a heart attack. Neither of us went to work. This was the beginning of a topsy-turvy day that changed our family forever.

Eight months later, just a few, cold, short weeks ago, Jim and I prepared for bed. Jim received a call from his sister that his father had been taken to the ER by ambulance for complaints of pain to his chest like an elephant stepping on it. His cardiac enzymes were elevated. They thought he had pneumonia, but wanted him in a heart hospital for further evaluation in case he was having heart attack. Jim's father was having typical symptoms of a heart attack, but the hospital was not sure.

A heart attack happens when the blood supply to the pumping muscle of the heart is cut off. Cells in the heart muscle that do not receive enough oxygen-carrying blood from that blocked blood vessel begin to die. The more time that passes without treatment to restore blood flow, the greater the damage to the heart. According to the CDC:

- about 15% of people who have a heart attack will die from it
- almost half of sudden cardiac deaths happen outside a hospital
- having high blood pressure or high blood cholesterol, smoking, having had a previous heart attack or stroke, or having diabetes can increase your chance of developing heart disease and having a heart attack.
- It is important to recognize the signs of a heart attack and to act immediately by calling 911. A person's chance of surviving a heart attack increases if emergency treatment is administered as soon as possible.

In our case we had a sad outcome and a good outcome. Jim's mom had experienced high blood pressure (hypertension) for many years and, while she was on medication, her blood pressure numbers

were never really in the normal range, so that allowed for continued damage to her heart's blood vessels, year after year. In May, when she had that vomiting all night, she was having a heart attack. The damage to her heart was so severe, we lost her despite high tech mechanical CPR, repeated medications and a helicopter flight to the heart hospital for her heart catheterization ("cath" a procedure to look at heart vessels). Like many women her heart attack symptoms weren't the ones we hear about all the time. Her main preventable risk factor for heart attack was high blood pressure.

The message is: if you have hypertension, please check your blood pressure at home and report your readings to your healthcare provider; maintain a healthy weight; eat a healthy nutritious diet rich in fruits, vegetables, low fat dairy and low in bad fats; decrease sodium (salt); strive for 150 minutes of physical activity per week; keep alcohol consumption to 2 or less beverages/day men and 1 or less per day women; and understand and take the medications for hypertension you are prescribed. If you have side effects that make you feel like not taking the medication or the cost is prohibitive, discuss that with your health care provider. Maybe there are other options that will keep you and your blood vessels happy.

Our good outcome is Jim's dad, who has had some preventable conditions for a heart attack for several years. A heavy smoker for 50 years, he quit 20 years ago. He also has been a bit stubborn about managing his type 2 diabetes which can be quite harmful to blood vessels. In the hospital he was taken by non-emergency ambulance to a heart hospital and further tests showed his heart muscle strong with no damage despite his elevated cardiac enzymes. He was found by X-ray to have pneumonia and, after 2 days of antibiotics, he had a heart cath which showed 99% blockage of the blood vessel oxygenating the side of his heart that sends blood to his body. A stent was placed to keep that blood vessel more open for blood flow and his heart is now quite healthy.

My message to you, during American Heart Month, is to make time to talk to your health care provider about your risks for heart attack, then make recommended changes to reduce those risks. If you or a loved one have had a heart attack, it is not too late to make lifestyle changes to avoid further damage. Be heart healthy! Encourage your loved ones to do the same.

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