

Cardiovascular: Be Happy – It's Good For Your Heart

A recent Dutch study has provided evidence that an optimistic outlook on life may be more important to our health and happiness than perhaps we had originally thought.

A team of researchers led by Dr Erik Giltay from the Delfland Institute of Mental Health undertook a study of 545 men aged 64 – 84 years and found that those with the most optimistic dispositions were about as half as likely to die from cardiovascular disease. For the purposes of the study, dispositional optimism was defined "in terms of life engagement and generalized positive outcome expectancies for one's future". Starting in 1985, dispositional optimism was assessed at five yearly intervals, ending in the year 2000. At each assessment a four item questionnaire was used. The researchers concluded that dispositional optimism remained a fairly stable trait over the fifteen year period and that it showed "a graded and inverse association with the risk of cardiovascular death". Once major factors such as smoking and family history had been taken into account, those classed as optimists in 1985 were 55% less likely to have died of heart disease or stroke by the year 2000.

This, of course, raises the question as to why an optimistic outlook should have such a profound effect on the risk of dying from cardiovascular disease. Giltay surmised that optimism may in fact affect cardiovascular disease in a number of ways. For example, optimists may be better at coping in difficult situations and take better care of themselves if they fall ill. An optimistic outlook may affect one's health through its influence on the nervous, immune and hormonal systems. An optimistic person may even be more likely to exercise, with all the health benefits that flow therefrom.

This latest study also ties in well with the findings of an earlier study into the effect of social isolation and the risk of developing cardiovascular disease. The research, presented to a 2005 meeting of the American Heart Association, demonstrated that men who did not have any close connections with friends and family were at greater risk of suffering from heart disease.

Between 1998 and 2001, researchers had studied 3,267 men and women (average age 62 years) from across America who were taking part in the Framingham Heart Study. Blood concentrations of four inflammatory markers

including interleukin-6 (IL-6) were measured. Inflammation appears to play a part in the development of atherosclerosis.

Participants in the study were also asked about their marital status, the number of relatives or close friends in whom they could confide in, whether they had any involvement in religious meetings or services and participation in groups such as day centres. Using this information, the researchers assigned a social network rating of one (social isolation), to four (social connection) to each participant. Once major risk factors for heart disease had been taken into account, the researchers found that men with the lowest level of social interaction had the highest levels of IL-6., with the difference between socially isolated and socially connected men being statistically significant. However, the researchers found no difference between socially isolated and socially connected women.

Again this raises the question as to why this should be the case. In this study researchers surmised that IL-6 may be elevated in socially isolated men because they are more prone to living less healthily and that socially isolated people are more often depressed and under stress than those who are more outgoing.

Whilst more research is needed into trying to answer the questions posed by these studies, it would seem clear that your sense of well being and outlook on life, coupled with being supported and socially well connected (if you are a man) do indeed impact on your cardiovascular health.

References:-

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