

Live Healthy and Be Well!

“Love your heart, so it can love”

Stephen Jarrard, MD, FACS

I remember two or three years ago my friend Janie P. Taylor made the very valid suggestion that, in the “month of romance,” I should write about the heart. I am going to leave the more romantic issues of the heart to those with more literary skill and flourish – and those parts are very important. But, we must do the right things to make the heart available for those pursuits – and your overall health, well being, and happiness.

The heart is a muscle. It is a special muscle called “cardiac” muscle, or *myocardium* (the prefix myo- meaning muscle). Another type of muscle is skeletal, such as your biceps – these muscles move you, and allow you to be an active part of the world around you. Smooth muscle, the final type – is that which lines the lining of your digestive tract and helps it to function. Cardiac muscle has one vital function – to pump blood – which brings oxygen, nutrients, and healing to your entire system – and is truly your life force. If your heart stopped, or even missed a long beat, you would notice it immediately, and within a few seconds would be unconscious. Cardiac muscle is only found in the heart, and is truly a unique creation of our Maker. A single cardiac muscle cell will contract or “beat,” if you put several together – they will quickly synchronize and beat in a regular rhythm. When they are all together in your heart, they beat in a very coordinated and perfect fashion to take the blood back from your body’s vein system, push it to the lungs where it loses waste products and is replenished with oxygen, and then back to the heart to be pumped out to your body by means of your arteries. Your heart works very hard for you ALL the time, never resting (except between beats), and most of the time you don’t even notice it.

Assuming a heart rate of 80 beats per minute, your heart will contract and relax over 115 thousand times per day, and thus over 42 million times in a year. Assume a lifetime of 75 to 80 years...and, well; you can see how much your heart is doing for you (over 3 trillion beats). My question to you, then, is...what are you doing for your heart?? Some very basic maintenance and prevention will ensure continued good function of the heart – which is always better than playing “catch up” after damage has occurred.

Although the heart is the muscle responsible for pumping blood all over – it, like all your other muscles, needs blood itself to survive, thrive, and do the job. It is when this blood flow to the heart, through the coronary arteries, is interrupted – that heart damage occurs. This damage can result from myocardial ischemia, which is when the blood supply is not enough to keep up – and you may feel *angina* (chest pain) during times of high demand, work load, or stress. Angina is a dangerous warning sign of impending permanent damage should more severe blockage or interruption occur. If this condition is taken to the extreme, and actual cardiac muscle death occurs because of the lack of perfusion to the heart muscle, this is known as *myocardial infarction*, commonly known as MI or heart attack. In this case, the heart is now permanently

changed and will not function as well as before. It may, with the help of medicines and lifestyle changes, be able to remodel itself and adapt – but never as well as before the damage.

So, in order for your heart to be available for romance, love, and to share your “heart” and soul with the world and make it a better place...please take care of your heart! Basic things to do – you already know most of them – A good, nutritious diet low in fat and high in protein and fiber will help prevent the high cholesterol which will plug your arteries and cause the heart to have blockage or to work harder to pump the blood to your body. Regular exercise is essential to good heart health, especially in the form of *cardio* exercise which will get your heart rate up and strengthen the muscle. If you are a smoker, you already know this is highly associated with heart and other vascular disease. If you are diabetic, keep your blood sugar under the tightest control possible – as high sugar hurts your heart, blood vessels, and other organs. If you have high blood pressure, see your doctor regularly to keep this controlled, as it can increase your risk of both heart attack and stroke. As far as any supplements beyond a good, nutritious diet, don't get carried away by what you see on TV or in advertising – but, Omega-3 fatty acids (fish oil) have been shown to be cardio protective, after it was noticed that Scandinavians have less heart disease in their population.

Be aware of all your heart does for you, and take care of it so that you can extend out the number of total beats in your life to be the highest number possible! Then, you can truly “get to the heart” of all other matters where your heart may lead!

We really do enjoy hearing from you with any questions, concerns, or ideas for future columns and/or health and wellness related issues for the *Georgia Mountain Laurel*. Please send an email to rabundoctor@gmail.com, or call us at 706-782-3572, and we will be sure to consider your input. This and previous articles can be now be found on the web at www.rabundoctor.com in an archived format. If you use Twitter, then follow us for health tips and wellness advice @rabundoctor. Until next month, live healthy and be well!