

NEW THERAPY FOR HEART ATTACKS

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NEW THERAPY FOR HEART ATTACKS

New drugs can stop or limit the damage of a heart attack, but only if the patient gets help immediately, experts say. Once the flow of blood to a portion of the heart is blocked for several hours, the damage is irreversible.

Knowing the symptoms of a heart attack, which can be wide-ranging and confusing, is extremely important. So is knowing risk factors, such as obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and family history.

Typical symptoms of a heart attack include a crushing pain in the chest, sweating, difficulty breathing, weakness and pain in the arms, particularly the left. Symptoms one could attribute to something else can cause devastating delays in seeking treatment. These include feelings of indigestion, back shoulder and neck pain and nausea. Early signs of trouble may appear during physical activity and disappear with rest. Any numbness or tingling of the fingers or toes, dizziness, shortness of breath or difficulty in breathing should not be ignored.

Clinical studies, laboratory investigations and a number of surveys show certain personal characteristics and life-styles pointing to increased danger of heart attack. These danger signs are called "risk factors." These well established risk factors are high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, cigarette smoking and diabetes mellitus. Attempts at modifying risk factors most certainly have contributed to the declining death rate from heart attacks in the United States. During the 1960's, U.S. death rates from heart attacks were still rising, but today's figures show that heart attacks have fallen dramatically. And, overall, heart-related problems have declined about 25 percent in the last decade. This decrease undoubtedly is due to better medical care of heart attack victims, but it is likely that a sizable percentage is related to modification of risk factors.

Medical technology is advancing at an increasingly rapid rate. More drugs and medical technology are available than ever before and the entire population is now more aware of the seriousness of heart attacks. There has been an increased interest in learning CPR and many community organizations now offer this valuable training. Of particular concern by doctors and researchers is the role that the American diet plays in the health of one's heart. Obesity predisposes individuals to coronary heart disease. Some of the reasons for this are known, but others are not. The major causes of obesity in Americans are excessive intake of calories and inadequate exercise. When caloric intake is excessive, some of the excess frequently is saturated fat, which further raises the blood cholesterol. Thus, obesity contributes to higher coronary risk in a variety of ways.

Many of the major risk factors for a heart attack are silent and much of the responsibility for their detection lies with each of us as individuals. Regular checkups are particularly necessary if there is a family history of heart attacks or heart disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels or diabetes.