

Heart Disease and Diet

It is estimated that 85% of all of the money spent in the U.S. on health care is for chronic degenerative disease that is preventable by consuming a proper diet and practicing healthy lifestyle habits. An excellent example is heart disease.

According to epidemiologist and cardiovascular disease expert Jeremiah Stamler, "Diet is like tobacco. The science is no longer in doubt."

Stamler discussed his most recent research about the connection between lifestyle and the development of cardiovascular disease, which has lasted for over 50 years, in an article published in Nutrition Action.

According to Stamler, one of the reasons why more definitive information has not been available about lifestyle and heart disease is that early studies compared two sets of unfavorable groups. For example, comparing a group of people with cholesterol levels of 240 and higher to a group whose levels are under 240 compares 2 groups of unhealthy people. A cholesterol level of 240 is not healthy, while levels under 180 are. The same thing is true with blood pressure. Comparisons were made between people with blood pressures above and below 140 over 90, while we know that healthy is defined as 120 over 80 and lower.

Obviously, comparisons of these groups did not show a lot of benefit of maintaining lower levels.

One very interesting fact was why these types of comparisons were made. According to Stamler, the reason was that there were too few people with lower numbers to construct a proper trial. When sorting for people with cholesterol levels under 200, blood pressure at or under 120 over 80 and no history of heart disease or diabetes, less than 10% of every group examined qualified. It took screening 400,000 people to identify enough low risk people to construct a trial, and these people were followed for at least 25 years. What a statement as to how unhealthy our population has become!

Here were the results from Stamler's research, which made comparisons between groups from which appropriate conclusions could be drawn:

1. For men, the long-term death rate from cardiovascular disease was reduced by 90% for low-risk men as compared to all others. It is estimated that these low-risk individuals lived for between 6 and 10 years longer than other men. The results were similar for low-risk

- women.
2. The low-risk people also had lower death rates from stroke and cancer
 3. They were more likely to enter old age with a better quality of life, less chronic illness, lower Medicare costs and no evidence of advanced atherosclerosis.
 4. Being overweight is a huge risk factor in terms of the development of all disease, including cardiovascular disease.

According to Stamler, most young people still have relatively good readings - for example blood pressure of 116 over 70, cholesterol under 180. However, as they age, due to consumption of fat, salt and sugar, those numbers rise until people develop significant risk of all types of degenerative conditions. This is totally preventable by consuming a better diet.

The scientific literature contains thousands of references as to how profoundly lifestyle and diet can influence biomarkers of health. For example, the DASH diet emphasizes fruits, vegetables, grains, beans and about 6% of calories from saturated fat. The DASH diet has been proven to be effective in lowering blood pressure even when it was not elevated in the first place. In other words low risk people lower their risk even more when they change their diets.

Stamler makes some excellent remarks about how we handle health and food in this country. He states, for example, that although tens of millions of people are taking statin drugs for cholesterol, drugs for diabetes, etc., that drugs do not solve the underlying problem, and goes on to say that heart disease is caused by lifestyle and that the only true way to reduce risk is to change lifestyle habits.

When asked why more people don't consume a healthy diet, he responds by saying that the government does not do enough to counter the marketing and advertising that the food industry uses to promote products. The meat, dairy, soft drink and fast food industries, for example stay away from debating the science because they can't. Instead, they come up with slogans like "pork, the other white meat", rather than claiming that saturated fat is not harmful.

This is why we need to educate everyone to become vigilante consumers - to follow the source of the message and the money behind it and then determine whether or not the information is valid, and to differentiate between advertising messages and research.

Dr. Pam Popper

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