

Callers tap advice to keep hearts healthy

By DAVID PESCATORE
Special to The Daily Journal

Heart disease claims dozens of New Jersey residents every day, but you don't have to be one of them.

Several area residents took their health into their own hands this week by seeking advice from South Jersey Healthcare staff cardiologist Dilip Viswanath on the Healthline this month.

Seven people took advantage of the free medical advice offered, and questions were still trickling in.

Concerns ranged from understanding a personal treatment plan to concerns about "hole in the heart disease."

Viswanath specializes in preventative cardiology, helping patients take steps now to avoid trouble later in life. It all comes down to adding up your risk factors, he said.

"You have to make an assessment of your lifestyle," Viswanath said. "Smoking is the biggest risk factor, but you also have to ask yourself if you are sedentary. Are you committed to an exercise program at least three to five days a week?"

For those who may be more at risk, especially those with a family history of heart disease, Viswanath recommends a simple blood test to check for inflammation in the arteries near the heart.

An elevated level of these "C-Reactive Proteins" may indicate a risk

Healthline

From B1

of a heart attack within the next 10 years, he said.

Beyond those factors, Viswanath added high blood pressure, cholesterol and diabetes as major risk factors for heart disease.

He said everyone in their early-30s and older should have regular screenings, but added that it's never too early to watch for problems.

"A 16-year-old with high cholesterol can make changes to reduce risk," he said.

Viswanath fielded a variety of questions. One dealt with the need for pacemakers.

"Pacemakers keep the heart from going too slow," he explained.

A defibrillator, however, can act as a pacemaker but also can regulate the heart's rhythm.

Viswanath said anyone with an abnormal EKG could be a candidate for a defibrillator, but they often are reserved for those with severely weakened hearts.

Recent reports have indicated that doctors may be giving defibrillators to patients who don't truly need them.

Viswanath said that may be true, but added that he'd rather err on the side of caution.

"Even if the device only

triggers once, that one time may save a person's life," he said.

Another question concerned congenital heart defects.

Commonly referred to as "hole in the heart disease," Viswanath explained that these defects go back to our time in utero.

While we are in the womb, he explained, we do not use our lungs to breathe air. As such, blood normally bypasses the lungs through a small hole in the heart, which usually closes

within three months after birth. When it doesn't, it can lead to clotting and eventually a stroke.

"Often, that's how we find out about it, the patient has a stroke,"

Viswanath said. "The hole can be closed through catheterization, much like angioplasty, except that instead of leaving a stent, we use a clamshell-shaped closure."

— Cardiologist
Dilip Viswanath

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Other questions came from patients questioning their treatments or seeking a second opinion.

For them, and anyone else unsure about their plan, Viswanath had this advice: "Ask questions."

"The doctor is there to explain things to you," he continued. "It's your body, the more you understand, the better I believe the outcome will be."