

W

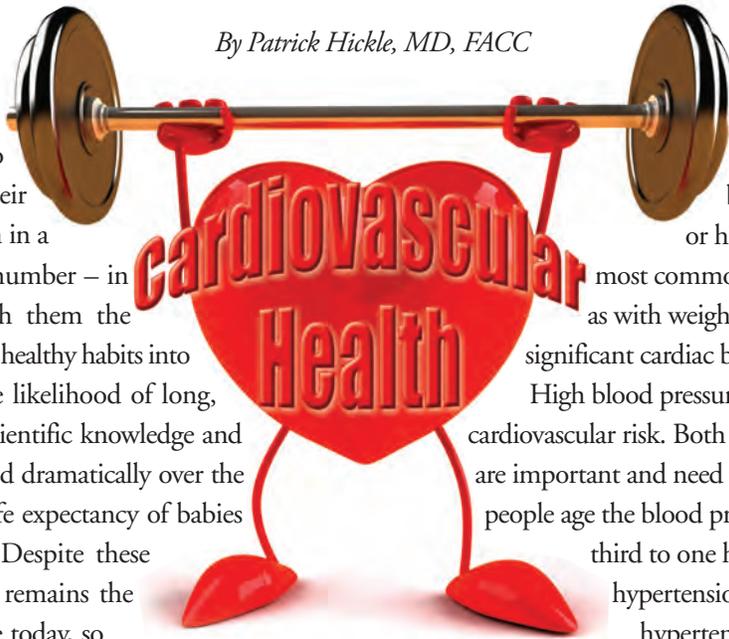
henever I speak to a classroom of elementary school students I ask them to calculate the number of times their hearts will beat in a day, and then in a lifetime. It's an amazingly high number – in the billions! I then review with them the importance of incorporating heart healthy habits into their daily lives to maximize the likelihood of long, healthy life spans. Fortunately, scientific knowledge and medical treatments have improved dramatically over the past few decades, allowing the life expectancy of babies born today to near 100 years! Despite these advances, cardiovascular disease remains the leading cause of death worldwide today, so it behooves us all to know the essentials of preventing heart disease.

Most of us have heard the important risk factors for heart disease including modifiable risks such as obesity, hypertension (high blood pressure), diabetes, tobacco use, high cholesterol and sedentary lifestyle, and our genetics or family history that we cannot do much to affect. Perhaps surprisingly, most forms of alcohol appear to be heart healthy in small quantities, although higher amounts can be deleterious to the heart muscle causing it to weaken and enlarge. Because the process of atherosclerosis or hardening of the arteries can actually start before adulthood, developing healthy habits early is vitally important.

Elevated cholesterol levels have been proven to correlate with and cause higher likelihood of suffering a cardiac event. Medical researchers have also proven that lowering total and bad (LDL) cholesterol levels lowers the cardiovascular risk. Diets high in cholesterol laden, fatty foods, especially trans fats found frequently in “fast foods,” or saturated fats, appear to increase lipid levels most dangerously, while other types such as mono unsaturated or omega 3 fatty acids seem to be much healthier. To decide to eat healthier (fish, poultry, lean meats, vegetables, high fiber, fruits and most nuts). Many will still have high cholesterol levels despite a healthy lifestyle, but fortunately effective medications are available that can lower cholesterol by 50% and even more.

Exercise has been proven to not only lower bad cholesterol levels but also raise good cholesterol (HDL) as well, providing cardio-protection. These are just two of the many ways exercise benefits us. Exercise also can lower levels of inflammation in our bodies, lower heart rates and blood pressure, and increase elasticity of our blood vessels. At least moderate intensity exercise at least 4-5 days a week for 20-30 minutes or more appears to maximize

By Patrick Hickle, MD, FACC



The Elliot.

*Live Better!*

benefit, and aerobic type exercise appears most heart healthy. This includes walking briskly, jogging, swimming, biking or hiking just to mention a few of the most common types. Resistance training, such as with weights, may provide less but still significant cardiac benefits.

High blood pressure (hypertension) also raises the cardiovascular risk. Both the systolic and diastolic readings are important and need to be kept under control. As people age the blood pressure naturally rises such that one third to one half of all adults may have hypertension. Because most people with hypertension will not have any symptoms, it's vitally important that all adults have it checked periodically as they age. Because sodium (salt) intake can cause significant elevations in blood pressure, sodium levels should be monitored in people prone to

hypertension. Many processed foods and canned foods as well as snack foods are high in salt, as is most restaurant food and thus one should look at food labels and ask for low sodium dishes when dining out. 2500 mg daily or less is considered a safe level, and for maximum benefit 1500 mg or less should help minimize blood pressure levels. Of note, those few patients with extremely low blood pressure levels may actually benefit from a salty diet.

Weighing more than ideal levels can also raise blood pressure, and so losing weight is another way to effectively lower blood pressure. Recent studies suggest that the average American weighs 20 lbs. more now than in the 1980's. This is a troubling trend when realizing that obesity is a significant risk factor for cardiovascular disease, as well as contributing to hypertension, diabetes and high cholesterol and other medical problems. Lifestyle changes have definitely contributed to our increasing girth. Fortunately, through exercising more and eating healthier as described above, we have the means to reverse these gains thus resetting our cardiovascular risk to a lower level.



*Patrick Hickle MD, FACC is a graduate of Georgetown University Medical Center and then served as a Major in the US Air Force at Wright Patterson Medical Center in Ohio. He completed his Fellowship training in cardiology at the University of Illinois Medical Center. He is the Medical Director of the Elliot ECHO Lab and under his guidance, the lab has received ICAEL accreditation.*