



July 30, 2011 – Washington, DC

Stress Test

Have you ever run through an airport trying to catch your flight or up a flight of stairs to get to a meeting? Get out of breath? Sure. Did you ever think, “Geez—it seems to be taking a long time to catch my breath!” Or did you maybe have a little chest pain that you ignored? Did you then think, “I work out regularly; it’s probably nothing.” Maybe it’s nothing—maybe not. Read about this study of athletes, and maybe you’ll understand why you shouldn’t ignore these signals.

The Study

Researchers examined the fitness level and variables associated with cardiovascular disease and diabetes in over 600 recreational athletes, both men and women. They divided the subjects into those under 35 and over 35. The objective was to see if there were differences in these risk factors due to age in very fit athletes.

Fitness Variables

As you might expect, the younger athletes were more fit, but their edge was smaller than expected: the difference in the amount of oxygen they used at maximal effort was less than 10%, and the difference in BMI was less than 5%. Those in the over-35 group were primarily runners while the under-35s included soccer players as well as runners. Running is still the best way to get fit and stay there *if* you can do it; not every one is built for running.

Cardiovascular Variables

The researchers found a slight increase in blood pressure, total cholesterol, and LDL-cholesterol in the over-35 group. Further, the data indicated that as the BMI increased, even in these very fit men and women, blood lipids increased as well. In a small percentage of athletes, triglycerides and blood sugar were slightly above normal; that’s the first indication of diabetes on the horizon.

A Closer Look

Make no mistake: all the subjects in this study were very fit. But the reason the researchers undertook this study was to see if risk factors for sudden death increase with age even in very fit people. The answer was yes. You’ve all probably heard about someone in their 40s finishing running a race and then dropping dead of a heart attack; something like that happened here in Grand Rapids just a few months ago when an otherwise healthy 37-year-old father of three collapsed and died during a race due to an undiscovered blockage in a coronary artery. That illustrates very clearly that being fit doesn’t give you immunity from heart disease and sudden death.

The Bottom Line

What this study illustrated is that even if you’re a recreational athlete or are really fit, you still need to take a stress test if you’re over 40 years old; I’ve had mine, and Paula had her first just a couple months ago—with her family’s history of heart disease, she was one happy lady when she got the all-clear.

Think of it as carburetion day of the Indianapolis 500: they race the engines at maximal speed to see if they hold up. That’s what a stress test does: sees what your heart is doing at maximal levels.

The other message is that you have to keep your weight in the healthy range. As weight went up, even in these very fit people, so did their cardiovascular risk. Listen to your body and take care of it. That means if you haven't done it yet, get yourself a stress test before you become a statistic—especially if any of those comments in the first paragraph sounded familiar.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

Reference: 1. MSSE. 2011; 43(6):943-950.

WGVU FM 88.5/95.3 **npr** ***Straight Talk on Health***

Hear Dr. Chet's take on the latest health news and research—listen to *Straight Talk on Health* at 7 p.m. Sunday in the Eastern Time Zone on WGVU-FM 88.5 or 95.3, or listen live via the Internet by going to www.wgvu.org and clicking on "Listen Live" in the gray bar at the top.

The health information in this message is designed for educational purposes only. It's not a substitute for medical advice from your healthcare provider, and you should not use it to diagnose or treat a health problem or disease. It's designed to motivate you to work toward better health, and that includes seeing your healthcare professional regularly. If what you've read raises any questions or concerns about health problems or possible diseases, talk to your healthcare provider today.

Subscribe to the Message from Dr. Chet at DrChet.com — © Chet Zelasko PhD LLC