

Disarming a Heartless Killer: How to Outsmart Cardiovascular Disease Before It Strikes

The country's deadliest threat affects both men and women, strikes us where we're most vulnerable, and is all too often left untreated. Now, with the right information and state-of-the-art technology, it's time to fight back.

By Melissa C. Navia

Time is everything in the ER. Precious seconds once taken for granted can now mean the difference between life and death. Often cold, always stressful, it is the last place anyone wants to be taken, but the first place to run to when emergency hits. The urgency of the ER is palpable: A gurney is rushed down the hallway. On it lies a 42-year-old man, terrified and helpless. He has just experienced a massive heart attack. Doctors in white coats scramble to catch up and surround him. Thoughts of his wife, his children, and his job cloud his head. The gurney slows to a halt, and he looks up at the doctor now standing next to him. "Am I going to die?" he asks, eyes wide and pleading. The doctor knows he doesn't have an answer. He sees this same scene play out, as if scripted, every day. Another heart attack, another case of untreated symptoms, another person caught completely off guard. He looks back at the patient and says, "I'll do my best." But he knows that anything he does now cannot compare to what the man could have done on his own years before. In the ER, the past becomes irrelevant. They go into the operating room, the doors shut, and everyone waits.

"There are too many things in life you can't control," says Dr. David Kavesteen, board-certified in cardiology and internal medicine, "so there's no reason to die from something that you can control, like your heart." The leading cause of death in the United States, heart disease poses the most insidious threat to our health on a regular basis, yet ironically, is extraordinarily treatable and even preventable. "People tend not to think about the heart until it's too late," says Dr. Kavesteen, who was the doctor in the story that played out above. "They don't know the statistics, they don't know what to look for, and they're afraid that if they do find something, that there is nothing we can do about it." The man that Dr. Kavesteen operated on had been a diabetic and a smoker. He was indeed able to save his life by opening up a severely clogged artery, but the scenario could have gone either way. A heart attack renders both patient and doctor relatively and frustratingly merciless to forces that were set in motion long ago, unchecked, undiagnosed.

So we know that heart disease is deadly. We know that its symptoms are often ignored. And we know that when it comes to prevention and treatment, the majority of us really don't, well, know. "There is so much you can do right now to reduce your risk of heart disease," insists Dr. Kavesteen, "but first you have to equip yourself with the facts and raise your awareness level." Let's start with risk factors: hypertension, high cholesterol, diabetes, smoking, and genetics, to name a few. All of these contribute to heart disease in all its forms. The term itself is very general and encompasses a host of diseases, including atherosclerosis (a condition in which artery walls thicken due to the build-up of fatty materials), coronary artery disease (caused by a clogging of the coronary arteries that supply the heart with oxygen and nutrients), peripheral vascular disease (blood vessels in

the legs become narrowed), cardiac arrhythmias (abnormal heart rhythms), and cardiomyopathy (when the heart muscle loses its ability to pump blood). Many of these can also be asymptomatic for years, making the need to understand and modify risk factors that much more important.

But what if there are symptoms? “The signs of heart disease are often disregarded or attributed to something less severe,” says Dr. Kavesteen. These include shortness of breath, palpitations, weakness, fatigue, dizziness, nausea, chest discomfort, and heartburn. If you find that you are experiencing any of these, ask yourself: What could be causing this? How often is it happening? Do I have any risk factors for heart disease? Questions like these ensure that we remain cognizant and are more likely to seek help. “Even if it turns out that there is nothing wrong,” Dr. Kavesteen reminds us, “remember that treatment is much easier and more cost-effective before a heart attack.” In other words, it never hurts to check.

And if there is something amiss, that’s where the field of cardiology gets to work. “The most advanced technology is changing the way we look at, treat, and understand the heart,” says Dr. Kavesteen. He quickly runs down a cursory list: tiny defibrillators that monitor the heart, high-tech springs that can open up clogged arteries, pacemakers that regulate every nuance, and the ability to examine microscopic changes in the heart to determine if there is an increased rate of sudden cardiovascular death. With tools like these at our disposal, heart disease becomes a significantly less formidable foe.

Dr. Kavesteen will be speaking about heart disease and the steps you can start taking now to prevent it at the upcoming NAVEL Expo. “The heart is the only organ that your body needs to live,” he cleverly points out, “and it’s easy to keep it healthy.” He will illustrate just how to do that, from what you do and the food you eat to the treatments and programs at your disposal. Just as important, Dr. Kavesteen will also highlight the differences between men and women when it comes to heart disease. For women, who still suffer from public misconceptions and often go undiagnosed, age is one of the most serious risk factors; after menopause, the threat of heart disease is exponentially higher. Dr. Kavesteen will discuss the reasons why and what can be done about it.

“Eat well and exercise. Live life today. Don’t wait for tomorrow,” urges Dr. Kavesteen, offering a fitting piece of advice for taking care of the heart, a fundamental part of us that does so much, both physically and symbolically. Its steady beating is the universally understood sound of life. Its artistic depiction is synonymous with love. So it only seems right that we should pay it the utmost attention. Take care of your heart today, and it will, in more ways than you know, take care of you tomorrow and long after.

Dr. David Kavesteen received his Bachelor of Science in Biochemistry from SUNY Stony Brook with a magna cum laude and distinction in research award. He pursued his passion for medicine at Brooklyn’s SUNY Health Science Center and completed his internal medicine training at the prestigious New York University Medical Center. Dr. Kavesteen continued further education by specializing in cardiovascular diseases and nuclear cardiology at Maimonides Medical Center. He is board certified in Internal

Medicine, Cardiovascular Diseases, and Nuclear Cardiology. He has received numerous awards, published many articles, and pursued additional education and training focused on wellness and anti-aging medicine. Dr. Kavesteen is also the founder of Natural Beauty Derma Spa, a new generation of medi-spa, dedicated to holistic wellness, skin rejuvenation, and stress reduction.