

# Are you at risk for heart disease?: What you don't know could kill you



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Priya Dharan knew she was at risk for cardiovascular disease. Twelve years ago, her mother underwent a multiple bypass procedure at age 62. Shortly afterward, Dharan's brother and uncle were hospitalized for similar surgeries. It was a wake-up call for the Los Altos resident, then 35 years old.

"I'm genetically blessed with those same genes," she said. "I thought it would be me to have a heart attack, because I have a family history of heart disease."

Photo Photos By Elliott Burr/Town Crier Since his heart attack in July 2008, Murali Dharan and his wife, Priya have incorporated whole grains, leafy vegetables and fruits into the family's meatless diet.

Instead, it was Dharan's 46-year-old husband, Murali, who suffered a heart attack July 25, 2008. But he didn't find out until 12 days later.

## Insight to hindsight

Dharan was doing all the right things, or so she thought, caring for her family – preparing vegetarian meals with an emphasis on grains, maintaining her own weight and seeking medical attention for family members when the need arose.

"I consider myself very medically intuitive," Dharan said. "I can usually read emergencies and do not typically shy away from going to the hospital or emergency rooms."

Though Murali complained of pain high in his chest the day before, and rated his pain on the 25th as an "8 on a 0-10 scale," Dharan said they attributed the discomfort to jet lag from a recent vacation, an increased exercise regimen or the psychological result of learning a colleague's wife was recently rushed to a hospital emergency room.

"I failed to rush him to the E.R.," she said.

For the second evening in a row, he instead took a pain reliever and fell asleep – but

mentioned the incidents to his primary-care physician the following week at a regular appointment.

Although the doctor thought Murali looked fine – he needed to manage his cholesterol – she recommended he see a cardiologist, who later performed an EKG and a stress EKG.

The subsequent call from Murali's regular physician still left them clueless – an e-mail stating the EKG showed "interesting results," Dharan said.

A follow-up with the cardiologist Aug. 6 about the EKG netted the Dharans a confusing explanation – at first.

"He said, a 'cardio-event must have occurred,' and it still went past us," Dharan said. "Until he said, a 'heart attack,' we didn't know it was a heart attack."

### Heart Health Awareness Month

In a 2010 update from the American Heart Association, nearly 399,000 women and 432,000 men in the United States died from cardiovascular disease, making it the No. 1 cause of death. In 2009, heart disease retained its dubious distinction as the nation's leading killer.

February is Heart Health Awareness Month, with ad campaigns targeting both men and women by various health organizations that promote heart-health screenings. Approximately 81.1 million adult Americans suffer some form of cardiovascular disease, and in a 2010 update from the American Heart Association, an estimated 43 million are under 60 years of age.

Dharan said age was a deterrent in Murali's decision on whether to seek prompt medical attention.

"Why would someone in (his) 40s worry about heart disease?" she asked. "This is something you might worry about in your 60s."

By 2020, the AHA hopes to improve America's cardiovascular health by 20 percent and reduce death from the disease and stroke by the same percentage.

But with an increasing South Asian population in the United States with ancestry links to India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka, that goal could prove difficult – they have a genetic predisposition that puts them at four times the risk for heart disease than the general population.

Enter El Camino Hospital's South Asian Heart Center, which conducts screenings, individualized lifestyle counseling and community education to promote awareness in combating the growing epidemic.

Following Murali's stent procedure Aug. 13, 2008 – "His right coronary (artery) was

almost 100 percent blocked,” Dharan said – Stanford doctors advised him to make some lifestyle changes.

“When we asked for clarification on what that meant, they had nothing,” she said.

Dharan did her own research and implemented diet changes for her family after reading a book by Enas A. Enas, M.D., and Dudesh Kannan, Ph.D., “How to Beat the Heart Disease Epidemic Among South Asians” (Advanced Heart Lipid Clinic, 2005).

“We thought we were leading a healthy lifestyle simply by virtue of being vegetarians,” she said. “We realized that being vegetarian does not translate to eating healthy.”

After changing the family’s diet to unprocessed grains, fresh fruits and leafy vegetables, and establishing an exercise routine, Murali dropped 40 pounds and 4 inches around his waist, Dharan said.

Dharan herself is a participant in the South Asian center’s heart screening and lifestyle counseling. Becoming a believer, she volunteers for the center, educating the community about heart disease and promoting the need for screening.

#### A global connection

Beyond an individual’s genetic predisposition to heart disease, researchers have identified other risks that increase the likelihood of coronary-related problems. And unlike risk beyond control, these factors can be modified.

In a widely published study of 29,000 individuals from around the world (half of whom experienced prior heart attacks), the INTERHEART study determined nine risk factors that appeared to be responsible for 90 percent of those myocardial infarctions – 95 percent for women.

In order of importance:

- LDL to HDL ratio (bad to good cholesterol).
- Smoking.
- Diabetes.
- Hypertension.
- Abdominal obesity.
- Stress or depression – a psychosocial aspect of heart disease that doctors agree may play a causal role in hypertension but is difficult to measure.
- Failure to eat fruits and vegetables daily.
- Failure to exercise.
- Failure to drink any alcohol.

## Controlling the uncontrollable

An estimated 650,000 to 1.3 million people of all ages live with the congenital cardiovascular defects cited in the AHA's update. And many of those afflicted aren't diagnosed – until they suffer sudden cardiac arrest.

Concerned by the apparently increasing occurrence of young athletes who die while participating in sports, cardiologist Dr. Bing Liem of El Camino's Heart & Vascular Institute offers heart screening for young athletes who exhibit warning signs for risk of sudden death from cardiac arrest.

In December 2008, Los Gatos High School senior Mikey Halpin, 17, collapsed and later died, even after passing the necessary physical to play for the school's football team. But that physical didn't uncover Halpin's heart defect – mitral valve prolapse.

It's a diagnosis Halpin's father doesn't want other athletes to discover too late, and he is promoting legislation to mandate cardiac screenings for California's young athletes, legislation that Liem supports.

In the meantime, Liem has conducted free screening clinics for athletes to educate the public about congenital defects that can be the silent killers of young adults and children who may live – or have grown to live – otherwise healthy lifestyles.

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