

How Young is Your Heart ?

World Heart Day, Sunday September 24th 2006

A low calorie, nutritionally balanced diet has been associated with slowing the ageing process of the heart - which is why this year's World Heart Day campaign asks: "How Young is Your Heart?"

Heart disease and stroke is the world's largest killer, claiming 17.5 million lives a year. Eighty per cent of these lives are from populations in low and middle income countries, many amongst people of working age. Controlling major risk factors such as an unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and smoking can prevent heart attacks and stroke and help the heart to age more slowly.

"It's almost an obsession in many societies to look as youthful as possible, but we should really be thinking about the age of our hearts," said Professor Valentin Fuster. President, World Heart Federation, "If we put as much effort into keeping our hearts young, we would see a dramatic decrease in the number of premature deaths from heart disease and stroke each year," said Professor Fuster.

Regular physical exercise is vitally important, reducing the risk of stroke by over 25 per cent and the risk of coronary heart disease by over 40 percent, Incredibly, the hearts of veteran athletes aged 50-70 have been found to be as strong and healthy as those of an inactive 20 year-old .

Physical inactivity contributes significantly to ageing the heart as it leads to obesity, diabetes and hypertension. The heart is a muscle which needs regular exercise to keep it pumping blood efficiently with every heart beat. Regular activity and its impact on associated risk factors helps to slow down the narrowing of the arteries to the heart and brain, encourages the body to use up excess stored fat, can help to reduce high blood pressure, improves cholesterol levels (by increasing the HDL level) and maintains normal blood glucose levels.

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It is also important to balance calories consumed with calories burned to help maintain a young heart for life, For adults, at least 30 minutes of brisk walking a day is recommended and adopting a balanced diet with plenty of fruits and vegetables, whole grain products, lean meat, fish and pulses, alongside low-fat and fat-free products, unsaturated soft margarines and oils such as sunflower, corn, rape-sced and olive oil,

Smoking is one of the most important risk factors to control, Quitting will help to keep the heart young as smoking increases blood cholesterol levels and levels of low-density lipoprotein cholesterol ("bad" cholesterol), raises the levels of blood clotting and overall increases the chance of a sudden blockage of an artery, Smokers not only put their own lives at risk, but they also endanger the lives of those around them, with passive smoking increasing the coronary death rate among non- smokers by up to 70 percent .

"Controlling the major cardiovascular risk factors can prevent heart disease and stroke and thereby slow the impact of ageing on the heart," said Professor Sidney Smith, University of North Carolina and Chairman Scientific Advisory Board, World Heart Federation, "It is never too late to start living a healthy lifestyle. By asking everyone to think about the age of their hearts on World Heart Day we are encouraging the world's population to adopt a heart-healthy lifestyle."

Under the slogan "A Heart for Life," World Heart Day is run by the World Heart Federation's member organizations in 100 countries. Activities on the day include health checks, walks, runs, jump rope, fitness sessions, public talks, stage shows, scientific forums, exhibitions, concerts and sports tournaments.