

## When a Parent (or Other Family Member) Is Diagnosed With Heart Disease

*Just as a whole family feels the pain when one of its members has heart disease, recovery is a group project, too. When parents, spouses or siblings have to change behaviors—breaking bad habits and learning good ones—they need the support and encouragement of those around them. Adopting a heart-healthy regimen together is one way of doing this.*

One British study showed that people are more likely to reduce their risk factors for heart disease (such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels and smoking) if their spouses do the same. On the specific issue of smoking, a survey of nearly 9,000 California households found that smokers who live in smoke-free homes—where the family has agreed to a total ban on tobacco use—are more likely to kick the habit than those whose families continue to allow them to smoke in the house.

Along with helping the patient, families that adopt healthy practices may be sparing themselves heart trouble down the road. It has long been apparent that heart disease runs in families. Children whose parents had heart attacks or other cardiovascular conditions relatively early tend to be at more risk for such disease themselves. But the cause may not be all genetic.

Researchers at University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center found that children whose parents had early heart disease tended to have more behavior-influenced cardiac risk factors—obesity, high blood sugar and high cholesterol—than children from other homes. So the life you save through encouraging a heart patient to eat right and exercise may be your own, if you practice what you preach.

What are some other things a family can do to help a member who's trying to recover? Here are some of the suggestions from Arnot Ogden Medical Center in Elmira, N.Y.:

- **Learn about the heart.** Learning about how the healthy heart works and the factors that affect heart attack risk can help you better understand a loved one's condition and help a loved one comply with his or her treatment plan.
- **Participate in therapy.** Training in physical rehabilitation techniques can help you take an active role in your loved one's recovery and express your emotional support. Inquire at the hospital's coronary care unit for available classes and training.
- **Know heart attack symptoms.** Everyone, children and adults alike, should become familiar with these common signs of heart attack: pain, squeezing, or pressure in the chest; shortness of breath, paleness, dizziness, vomiting; and shooting pain that may travel from neck, jaw, shoulders, and/or arm. If a person experiences even one of these symptoms, get emergency medical help immediately.
- **Learn CPR.** If your loved one should suffer another heart attack, knowing cardio-pulmonary resuscitation may make a life-and-death difference. Older children and adults should all be trained in CPR in order to act quickly in an emergency.

# PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

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