

Mind, Body And Soul:

What Does Your Family History Reveal???



By Cody McSellers-McCray

With American Heart Month, Black History Month, and Valentine's Day all happening in February, we are all bombarded with various messages promoting these topics. But consider this. You're under 50. You're pretty fit. You can't have a heart attack, right? Truth is, starting

at the age of 35; heart disease is the leading killer of women. About 35,000 women younger than 50 die of heart attack annually, but only 20 percent of women believe they're at risk for heart disease. According to the Chicago Department of Public Health, 2006 Community Profile for Austin, the leading causes of death are heart disease (25.2%), malignant neoplasms/cancer (21.6%) and cerebrovascular diseases/stroke (5.7%). Well in this article I hope to bust the myth that this is just a disease of men and older women; I also hope to help us all learn how to lower our own risks.

In 1992, my mom received a devastating call that her dad my grandpa had passed away, due to a heart attack. As we rushed to get over to his house to meet the rest of the family, I watched as my mom panicked and worried about how she at 30, would go on without her father. As a 12 year old, who hadn't experi-

enced deaths in the family that I could remember, this moment changed my life, as I began to experience a familial death after this moment every year for the next 5 years and every few years after that.

These experiences were my introduction to the word FAMILY HISTORY. I began to ask questions, trying to understand why everyone in my family that I loved was dying. I also noticed that this pattern of deaths related to heart disease, stroke, diabetes, high blood pressure, overweight and high cholesterol, occurred mainly on my maternal side of the family. No one on my mother's side of the family at the time had lived past 60 years old. This picture of my family's health was beginning to look scary, as I wondered who would be next. My mom was also a smoker, overweight and physically inactive. It was these turn of events, along with an excellent educational system, that engaged and intrigued me

about health. In fact, I learned freshman year of high school, in my health education class, that all of the conditions listed above are common within the African American population. As a result, I've dedicated my life to exercise and I've strived to live a healthy life physically (through running and yoga), nutritionally (eating wholesome and nutrient rich foods), and mentally (minimizing stress by standing drama free).

We've all heard of those people who had high cholesterol, who took a pill and ignored it. Ditto with high blood pressure, and again with diabetes. They take medications, but don't make any major life changes. Lekia, 36 a single mom of two, with the youngest being only 5 months, living on the West Side recently told me a similar story. When her father was 59, one of his toes turned black, a complication of diabetes, and his whole foot had to be amputated. "That was a turning point for everyone," she says. "The doctor said that 90 percent of his coronary arteries were clogged."

Like my story and many of you, family history once again was a major player in the health of her family. Over the next few weeks Lekia began to look in the mirror. She was 15 pounds overweight and decided to ditch those extra pounds. She made an appointment to get a physical, she started running, and she did some digging on her family history. Her father went on to have five amputations and died at age 63. Her mom has high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Her maternal grandmother has had a stroke. Her paternal grandfather died of a heart attack. And most of her aunts and uncles have some risks for heart disease or diabetes. She soon realized that dealing with illness would be her destiny if she didn't make changes. Lekia now walk/run about 40 minutes a day, four days a week and lifts weights

twice a week. She says, "I was the first of my three sisters change my lifestyle, and they followed suit." She no longer eats the nightly steak and potatoes diet her parents followed. Instead, her meals are well-balanced and varied, with plenty of fiber, a lot of lean protein (she eats fish at least twice a week) and vegetables. She also exercises every two hours to keep her metabolism up and blood sugar stable. "Every food decision I make now, is because it has the best nutrients for my body," Lekia says.

But as the old cliché goes, what's on the inside that matters, and your heart is the most important muscle of all. Your heart never gets a break, even while we sleep, so we need to train it for the physical and physiological stresses we endure in life.

***FIVE WAYS TO LOWER YOUR HEART ATTACK RISK

1. Learn your family history. Diabetes, heart disease, stroke, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure all can run in families, hiking your risk.
2. Eat right. Eliminate saturated and Trans fat from your diet, and replace them with antioxidant rich fruits and vegetables.
3. Know your numbers. If you have no known risk factors, keep your BMI below 25, total cholesterol at 100 or below, HDL at 50 (women) and 40 (men) or above, total cholesterol at 150 or below, triglycerides at 150 or below, and your waist circumference 35 inches or smaller.
4. Exercise. Do at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise every day and weight train twice a week to lower your percentage of body fat. Exercise alone can reduce your risk of heart attacks by 35 to 50 percent.
5. Quit Smoking. You're still at increased risk up to five years after quitting, but the risk steadily decreases.

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