Close to My Heart

I hope you don’t find this issue’s cover story on heart disease in women as useful as my family did.

Over the long July 4th weekend, my wife, Donna, and I were enjoying several beautiful days at the Delaware beach. A highlight was taking a long bike ride through Cape Henlopen State Park, where the hot sun was tempered by a cool ocean breeze. The park abounds with red-winged blackbirds, great egrets, and other gorgeous birds.

When we got back to our friends’ house, Donna felt an unusual pain in her chest and left arm. She asked a question that she had never before asked: “Am I having a heart attack?”

That seemed so bizarre, but I gave her a draft of the cover article, which I had recently edited. Donna’s symptoms were distressingly similar to those described in the article, so she checked the websites of the American Heart Association and the Women’s Health Alliance, the group co-founded by Barbara Streisand. The take-away message from all three sources: “Don’t take a chance; get thee to a hospital fast.”

It seemed so strange for this youthful, 64-year-old woman, whose symptoms were not all that severe, to be having a heart attack. But because she had never experienced those symptoms before, Donna wisely decided to go to the hospital.

So, even though the beach beckoned us from the east, we drove a few miles west to the Beebe Medical Center. The nurses quickly examined Donna and did several tests, including an electrocardiogram and a blood test for an enzyme that reflects heart damage.

The next morning the cardiologist confirmed that Donna had indeed had a heart attack. What shook both of us the most was his suggestion that she might need coronary bypass surgery. Thankfully, that didn’t come to pass.

Within two hours, Donna had an angioplasty and was the new owner of two stents, one in an artery that was about 70 percent blocked and one in another that was nearly 80 percent closed.

Donna came out of the ordeal fine. She was amazingly alert and chipper two hours after the medical procedure and went back to work several days later.

The experience made her more determined to eat an even healthier diet (lunches, snacks, and restaurants are her challenges) and to exercise more. Heart disease and diabetes run in Donna’s family, so she has to work especially hard to compensate for those genes.

So, women—and your spouses and friends—read the cover story carefully! If you ever have even mild symptoms of a heart attack, call 9-1-1 and go to the hospital immediately.

And, symptoms or not, please, please, try even harder to eat the kind of diet we have long recommended (see p. 11). Load up on fruits and vegetables, add some beans, nuts, whole grains, and seafood, and minimize the salt, red meat, egg yolks, and sugary foods and beverages.

A healthy diet won’t guarantee that you’ll live forever, but it will certainly increase the odds that there will be many more bike rides in your future.

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