

November 2002

Patient Powerline from the desk of Marie Savard, M.D.

RE: The ABC's of Heart Disease

Dear Friends,

Hopefully by now you have made an appointment to receive your flu shot - and pneumonia vaccine – if necessary. Remember, it only takes two weeks after the shot to be fully protected against the flu so it is really never too late. So far flu season has only just begun so there really is lots of time.

I thought I would tell you what has happened to me since my last newsletter. In mid October, my 81-year-old father-in-law had major heart surgery - he had coronary bypass surgery because of a critical blockage in his arteries and replacement of his aortic valve and repair of his mitral valve. He is now doing well and recovering at home with me for the first six weeks. Once again I am reminded of the importance of being a health buddy – both in the hospital and for follow-up doctor visits. The world of health care as a patient is just too confusing and overwhelming for people to go it alone.

You may remember that my parents both had heart bypass surgery a few years ago and just last winter my dad had a successful repair of an aortic aneurysm. As you can imagine, heart disease is a lot on my mind right now.

When I speak about “heart disease”, I am talking about atherosclerosis; blockage of the arteries from years of cholesterol build up and inflammation in the blood vessel wall. Although almost everyone is at risk as they age, the most important risk factors include smoking, high LDL cholesterol and low HDL cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity and sedentary lifestyle. Recent studies suggest that measuring the level of inflammation in the blood by checking the CRP (C-reactive protein) test can also be helpful. A high CRP level apparently tells more about your heart attack risk than a high cholesterol level! If you want to learn more about this simple inexpensive test, type in any search engine “C-reactive protein” and explore.

As heart disease will effect most of us at one time or another (almost 1 out of every 2 people will have heart disease) – I thought I would share with you some basic facts about treatment that everyone should know about. Please share this information with someone you know – it may surprise you that many people with heart disease ARE NOT getting the treatment they desperately need!!

The ABC's of Heart Disease Treatment

There is a simple checklist that everyone with heart disease should follow to be sure they are getting the best care possible. It really is almost as simple as remembering your “ABC’s”.

- **A** – “A” stands for ACE inhibitor and aspirin. An ACE (angiotensin converting enzyme) inhibitor or an angiotensin receptor blocker is a type of medication that not only lowers your blood pressure; it also prevents kidney disease and treats heart failure. Many heart patients and almost every person with diabetes should be on this medication. Aspirin is also important to prevent a second heart attack and stroke. A daily baby aspirin is usually enough. If you are allergic to aspirin, your doctor can use another type of blood thinner; for example a medication called Ticlid or ticlodipine. There are a number of different brands of ACE inhibitors; lisinopril, ramipril and enalapril are just three generic examples.
- **B** – “B” stands for Beta-blocker medication and blood pressure (BP). Most heart patients (including patients with heart failure) should be on a beta-blocker to control their heart rhythm and blood pressure. Research has shown that it can prevent sudden death in a patient with heart disease. Generic names include propranolol, atenolol and metoprolol.
Don’t believe the old “wives tale” that a normal blood pressure should be “100 plus your age”. In general, the lower the BP the better. Especially if you are a diabetic, your blood pressure goal should be under 130/80. If you are a diabetic with kidney disease or protein in your urine your BP should be even lower – 125/80.
- **C** – “C” stands for cholesterol. Know your cholesterol numbers and see that you are in the target range. All patients with heart disease (and that includes patients with blocked arteries in the legs, heart, aorta and brain) and all patients with diabetes (whether they have a diagnosis of heart disease or not) should have an LDL cholesterol of 100 or lower. The “statin” cholesterol medications can be life saving for patients with heart disease, and begin to protect your heart within days of taking the medication. The “statins” not only lower the LDL cholesterol, they also block the inflammation that contributes to heart disease. Common trade names for the “statins” include Lipitor, Mevacor, Pravachol and Zocor. It is NOT good enough just to know your total cholesterol; the breakdown is critical too. Ask for a copy of all your blood work so that you can keep a record of all the results.
- **D** – “D” stands for diet and diabetes. Commonsense when choosing a diet is my best recommendation. That means balance and a variety to include 5 servings or more of fruit and vegetables, lots of fiber and grains and fewer carbohydrates than usual. Avoiding anything white (white flour, rice, pasta, bagels, sugar, etc.) makes sense too. Although Duke University just completed a study of the Atkins diet (yes, the one that allows eggs, bacon and other saturated fats) and found great results – I think that the long-term safety is not known and probably not good!! If

you are diagnosed with diabetes (and even a borderline high fasting blood sugar over 126mg counts) then you should consider yourself a heart patient already. The ABC's apply to you too because your chances of having a heart attack is just as great as someone who already had a heart attack. Losing even a few pounds can make all the difference in the world. People with diabetes need to know their hemoglobin A1C levels too (an A1C level as close to "6" as possible is ideal). Treating your diabetes with the right medication will also help reduce your risk of heart disease. Examples of common helpful diabetes medications to control your blood sugar include Glucophage, Glyburide, Avandia and Actos.

- E – "E" stands for exercise. JUST MOVE – need I say more?

Now that you have an introduction to the "ABC's" of heart disease treatment, do your own homework on the web. Go to your favorite search engine and explore some of the names I have mentioned. Ask a family member or friend with heart disease how they are doing and what they are taking.

Give the Gift of Life-Saving Information

The holidays are rapidly approaching (I can hardly believe how quickly the fall has passed us by). Offer to be a health buddy for a friend or family member during the next year. Read my book, *How To Save Your Own Life: The Savard System for Managing – and Controlling – Your Health Care*, to learn much more about the value of being a health buddy (http://www.drsavard.com/system_book.htm).

My system (<http://www.drsavard.com/system.htm>) teaches you how to collect and store your own medical records and manage your own health care - and is also available at a great price. Think about giving *The Savard Health Record: a six-step system for managing your health care* (http://www.drsavard.com/system_record.htm) to your family and friends.

Special sale for this holiday season (available through the end of this year) when ordering three or more binders, "The Savard Health Record."

\$8.95 each plus shipping and handling. To place your order please email eileen@drsavard.com or call toll free 877-SAVARDS (728-2737) requesting this holiday special!!

From our website "Ask DrSavard"

Q: Dear Dr. Savard

I just joined your group and am in total agreement about the need to provide a medical history to your doctor. The only problem is that when you do, a great number of them put you down as too interested in your health. "But what do you do for fun" was the response of my new physician as she observed the drug, medical and dental reports I had compiled. (This compilation was done on the recommendation of a dentist who thought it would help the various doctors I was seeing at that time. I don't believe he ever paid much attention to it, as he prescribed a drug that was on my can't use list.) A big problem is that I react to most medications in some manner. Dyes, binders, fillers and some time the meds themselves are at fault. I have tracked down as many causes as I can find, but am still at a loss as to how to handle the situation. As I move from doctor to doctor, dentist, etc. (all on referrals/consult programs) my file gets bigger and bigger...becoming intimidating even to me. But the bottom line is that I am told, "If you can't/won't take my drugs, then move on. I, and a good number of my friends, feel that today's hurry up medicine is greatly lacking in good care. Just try to become an involved participant in your own medical care in an HMO/Medicare. Thanks for letting me vent to you. Any suggestions in dealing with this problem would be appreciated.

A: Dear Marilyn,

PLEASE don't give up. I do hear ever so often of other stories similar to yours. A friend of mine was recently diagnosed with a serious blood disorder. She was following my system, keeping track of everything - when a new hematologist said to her, "Do you have nothing better to do than collect your information, that you don't even understand". She was outraged and found another doctor. Eventually many more people will vote with their feet and doctors will learn how important it that we take responsibility for our own health. It is the best medicine - yet for some reason a few doctors are threatened by this. It sounds like you have saved your own life on more than one occasion.

Please continue to spread the word; it is just a matter of time.

Marie

Marie Savard, MD

Marie Savard, MD is an internationally known internist, women's health expert and champion of patient empowerment. She is the founder of The Savard System, dedicated to teaching patients how to manage their own healthcare. She is the author of two highly acclaimed books, *How to Save Your Life: The Savard System for Managing-and Controlling-Your Health Care* (Warner Books, Inc. 2000) and *The Savard Health Record: a Six-Step System for Managing Your Health Care* (Time-Life, Inc. 2000).

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