Your Health: Anger management style influences heart health

by Rallie_McAllister

If you're a hothead, more than your relationships are at stake. People who are prone to angry outbursts and fits of rage have a significantly greater risk of developing heart disease than their calmer counterparts.

Over the past decade, scientists have built a strong case for the link between anger and heart disease. In a six-year study of nearly 13,000 healthy middle-age adults, University of North Carolina researchers found that men and women who were highly anger-prone were much more likely to develop coronary artery disease or experience heart attacks than those who were slow to anger.

Compared to subjects with the lowest levels of anger, the angriest folks in the study had roughly double the risk of coronary heart disease and nearly three times the risk of suffering a heart attack. The association between anger and cardiovascular disease held true even after the researchers adjusted for other major risk factors, including high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol levels, obesity and cigarette smoking.

When it comes to heart health, anger may be just as dangerous for younger adults as it is for middle-age individuals. In a study of men and women ages 18 to 35, researchers at the Kaiser Permanente Medical Care Program reported that subjects who scored high on tests measuring anger and hostility were 2.5 times more likely to develop signs of heart disease than those with average or below-average scores.

Doctors and scientists have long suspected that having a short fuse can endanger heart health and reduce life expectancy. Anger is associated with habits that increase the likelihood of developing heart disease, including smoking, low levels of physical activity and excessive use of alcohol.

Recent research shows that anger also produces direct biological effects on the heart and arteries by triggering the release of adrenaline, cortisol and other stress hormones associated with the body's "fight or flight" response.

High levels of stress hormones contribute to cardiovascular disease in several ways. Not only do they constrict blood vessels and boost blood pressure, they also enhance the clotting potential of the blood, increasing the likelihood that blockages will form in the heart's arteries.

In addition to triggering the release of stress hormones, anger and other negative emotions can lead to increases in C-reactive protein (CRP), a substance linked to hardening of the arteries and a greater risk of heart disease. In a study of 127 healthy adults, Duke University scientists found that men and women who were more prone to anger, hostility and depression had CRP levels that were two to three times higher than those of their calmer, more contented counterparts.

There's little doubt that venting your anger in the form of explosive outbursts and temper tantrums can be bad for your health, but completely holding it in can be just as deadly, especially for women. The results of a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association showed that women who regularly suppressed their anger had death rates that were roughly twice as high as those who expressed their displeasure more openly.

While negative emotions can be hazardous to your health, positive emotions appear to have the opposite effect. Experiencing happiness and engaging in laugher have been found to benefit the cardiovascular system in a number of ways.

Happiness is associated with lower levels of stress hormones known to contribute to cardiovascular disease. In a three-year study of 216 men and women, scientists at the University College of London found that blood levels of cortisol were 32 percent lower in happier individuals than in those who harbored more negative emotions.

Researchers at the University of Maryland Medical Center found that patients diagnosed with heart disease were 40 percent less likely to laugh in a variety of humorous situations compared to folks of the same age who were free of cardiovascular disease. Unlike their healthier, happier counterparts, the subjects with ailing hearts rarely used laughter as a means of dealing with negative emotions, and sometimes they failed to recognize humor altogether.

Anger is a natural part of life, but expressing anger in positive, appropriate ways doesn't always come naturally. If tactics like counting to 10, talking things out or walking away from a potentially volatile situation don't seem to be working, getting professional counseling or participating in anger management classes can help.

Developing an effective strategy to deal with anger will undoubtedly improve the quality of your relationships. Even better, it might just save your life.

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