Happiness Protects Your Heart

February (HealthDay News) -- People who are enthusiastic and content are less likely to develop heart disease than less happy people, researchers from Columbia University report.

In this prospective study of the relationship between happiness and heart disease, researchers concluded that if everyone did more of the things that made them happy, they could significantly reduce their risk of heart attack and angina.

"We were excited to discover in a large population-based sample of adults that the tendency to express positive emotion predicted fewer heart attacks across a period of 10 years," said lead researcher Karina Davidson, director of Columbia's Center for Behavioral Cardiovascular Health.

"The study suggests that those people who are happier have heart-protective outcomes," she added.

Davidson speculated that several factors may combine to producing this effect. Happier people tend to sleep better and to practice more heart-healthy behaviors, she said.

In addition, these people tend to have less stress in their lives and handle the stress they do have better than less happy people, she added.

For the study, Davidson's team followed 1,739 men and women for 10 years. These people all participated in the 1995 Nova Scotia Health Survey. At the start of the study, everyone had their risk for heart disease assessed.

In addition, researchers looked for symptoms of depression, hostility, anxiety and the expression of positive emotions -- known as "positive affect." This is defined as the experience of pleasurable emotions, such as joy, happiness, excitement, enthusiasm and contentment, according to Davidson.

The researchers found that over the study period the happier someone was, the less likely he or she was to develop heart disease. In fact, for every point on a five-point scale that measured positive affect, the risk of heart disease dropped 22 percent.

However, unhappy people had a 22 percent increased risk of having a heart attack or chronic chest pain, compared with those who were somewhat happy. These somewhat happy people also had a 22 percent increased risk for heart problems compared with people who were moderately happy, the researchers noted.

"In the meantime, it is good for one's quality of life and mental health to engage in happy behaviors or things that give you pleasure on a daily basis -- and many of us here in North America don't do that," she said. Negative emotions such as depression, anxiety and anger have been shown to be associated with increased risk of cardiovascular events and mortality.

"These findings are intriguing. The clinical significance will depend on whether it can be subsequently shown that interventions designed to increase positive affect can lower the risk of cardiovascular disease," he added.

However, while maintaining a positive affect may be one factor associated with a lower risk of cardiovascular disease, regular exercise, not smoking, a healthy diet and maintaining optimal blood pressure, cholesterol levels and body weight are well-established and essential, Fonarow noted.

More information

For more information on heart disease, visit the American Heart Association.