

WHAT'S UP DOC PETE?

I run at least five miles every day. At first, I exercised to lose weight, decrease my cholesterol and improve my cardiovascular health. I remember the story



Peter J. Muran, MD

of Jim Fixx. Could I be damaging my body in training for triathlon events?

For those who do not recall the story of Jim Fixx, he was a marathon runner in the 1980's who became the icon for the jogging explosion in fitness. At the age of 52 he died of a massive heart attack from clogged arteries. Because of his high exercise profile, most endurance athletes thought it would have been impossible for him to have suffered such an ending. It sparked the search into the arteriosclerotic possibilities, which identified inflammation, and not cholesterol, as the major cause of clogged arteries.

This is further illustrated by the fact known in the medical community that the majority of patients having heart attacks have cholesterol scores of less than 200 mg/dl. The medical community also knows that there is a higher correlation between cardiovascular disease and inflammation, as measured by the C-reactive protein, than by cholesterol levels. Statin medications are used to lower cholesterol and decrease inflammation as per the C-reactive protein, but the inflammation lowering properties of statins are not as high as some natural remedies and statins have a high incidence of side effects.

Adjusting to the perspective that the greater contributor to cardiovascular disease is inflammation, and not elevated cholesterol, leads to the correlation between high demand exercise and cardiovascular disease. Exercise increases the demand on the body to activate available fuel to form energy while managing the waste byproducts of the fuel by deactivation and removal. This is similar to an automotive engine igniting gasoline to give off energy and exhaust. The problem lies in the exhaust, or waste products. As exhaust is a toxic waste product of the engine so are the waste products of the body harmful to the tissue if they are not deactivated and removed fast enough. If the waste products are produced faster than they are deactivated, toxicity and inflammation can occur, which leads to oxidative stress and the beginning of the disease process.

This does not mean that endurance exercise is harmful but needs to be managed. Please join me in the next issue when I will describe how to best protect your body from the damage of oxidative stress heightened during endurance exercise.



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