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# Your heart is in your hands



## Pay attention to prevention and you'll be a winner



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**T**hink of heart health as a game of draw poker. You are dealt five cards and can exchange up to three of them to get something better. You don't stand pat (keep exactly what you have) unless you are dealt a winning hand the first time around.

Few people are — in cards or in health. But in health, or at least in cardiovascular health, you can change most of your cards and improve the ones you can't change.

Dr. Stephen Devries calls it "stacking the deck in your favor," and it is a premise around which he has built a practice. Devries, a cardiologist, is the medical

director of the Healthy Heart Center in Deerfield, a clinic of the University of Illinois at Chicago. Trained as an interventional cardiologist (one who does angiograms, angioplasties, etc.) he describes himself now as a preventional cardiologist.

But isn't that redundant? Don't all cardiologists stress prevention?

Not according to Devries, who says his UIC clinic, which also has offices in Chicago, is the only one he knows of that is dedicated strictly to prevention. "Far too little attention is paid to prevention," he said. "The message appeals more to the public than to physicians. Most don't stress prevention enough.

"Cardiology is linked to people in masks who do procedures. But angioplasties and stents are not the goal. In the midst of or on the verge of a heart attack, sure you do them. But they are an admission of failure. That's not where it's at."

Where it's at, in Devries' opinion and in his practice, is largely in the hands of the patients who come to see him. "Patients I see are concerned about their risks; they have a family history (of heart disease) or have seen heart problems in colleagues or family members and it scares them.

"Often the advice they've gotten from their physician is: 'Eat fewer eggs, watch your diet, see you next year.'

"We do something different," said Devries. "We talk about diet and lifestyle and take blood tests to look for risk factors that don't usually get checked."

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This means going beyond the typical lipid profile of HDL, LDL, triglycerides and total cholesterol, since in one third to one half of patients with heart problems, he said, there is no evidence of elevated cholesterol or other standard risk factors.

So Devries tests the blood for other things that are linked to coronary artery disease. Among them: the size and density of the LDL particle (large is less dense and better than small); homocysteine, an amino acid that in high levels can cause hardening of the arteries; Lp(a), a combination of an LDL fat with a blood-clotting chemical; and C-reactive protein, a measure of inflammation in the body.

Each of these is known to influence the development of heart disease, but to what extent remains uncertain. "Prevention is still evolving," Devries said.

The same could be said for his medical philosophy. The physician who began his career as a mainstream cardiologist and wrote the Heart Beat column for the Chicago Sun-Times, is now among only a handful in his specialty currently pursuing a fellowship in integrative medicine. A proponent of diet, exercise, supplements and stress reduction as the fab four of heart health, Devries believes in "empowering patients and humanizing medicine.

"It began when I was writing the column. Readers asked a lot of questions about nutrition and I had to do research to answer them," he said, adding: "It's not common among cardiologists to have nutritional knowledge. That's craziness!"

So he made it his business to learn. And three years ago the Deerfield resident opened the Healthy Heart Center in his town, where he offers "high tech tests and low tech, or natural, treatments."

For example, folic acid and vitamins B6 and B12 are used to lower homocysteine levels; niacin is taken to treat Lp(a); and fish oil with DHA and EPA (omega 3 and 6 fatty acids) has been proven to cut risk of sudden death after a heart attack.

"People here are proactive and want to know about prevention. I see patients in Deerfield only one day a week (on Fridays) but they have changed my practice," said Devries.

For example, he explained, "I think statins (cholesterol-lowering prescription medications) are very good, but many of my patients reject medications and want to do it (lower their cholesterol) nutritionally. I'm game; I'm open to natural options — but they have to be scientifically valid," he said.

In other words, you have to know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em. "Diet, exercise and supplements work for some, but for certain problems they don't have the potency of statins or blood pressure medications. Many of my patients accept medications after they've tried natural means. They relax when I don't push pills.

"People need to feel empowered," Devries said. "My theory is humanizing medicine by integrating the traditional with the alternative."

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## **Power tools for the heart**

Susan Newman came to Dr. Stephen Devries at the UIC Healthy Heart Center in apparent good health. Her weight was normal, she exercised regularly, she watched her diet. "I had good cholesterol; my LDL was low, my HDL was high," said the 59-year-old North Shore woman.

"But I had a very bad history. My mother and grandmother died of heart disease in their early 60s. My aunt died of it in her early 40s."

After hearing her family history, Devries administered blood tests that measure levels of homocysteine, C-reactive protein and Lp(a). The first two were OK, the third was alarmingly high. "Normal Lp(a) is below 30; mine was over 90," said Newman.

Devries felt this put her at risk for heart disease and prescribed niacin. In just a few months her Lp(a) levels dropped to normal and have remained that way. She continues to take the niacin

"Very few who stick with the program have recurrent problems," said Devries.

"The program," of course, varies with each patient in this practice which integrates traditional preventive cardiology with alternative mind-body techniques.

Appointments at the Healthy Heart Center, which is open on Fridays in the Lake-Cook Plaza, begin at 6:30 a.m. so working patients who need their blood drawn don't have to fast until midday and miss work.

While sophisticated blood chemistry is one of Devries' high-tech tools, the cardiologist uses a number of low-tech treatments which he calls "power tools for your heart."

Chief among them are nutrition, vitamins and supplements. "We talk about diet; fats, carbohydrates, proteins — which ones are good and where to get them.

"And I tell my patients exercise is critical. It's half of what they can do to help their heart. It's important to do both aerobics and weight training. Get a pedometer and work up to 10,000 steps a day.

"Exercise and losing weight are one of the best treatments, but even more important than overall weight is waist circumference — belly fat. It's one of the main means of assessing cardiac risk," said Devries. A waist measurement of over 40 inches in men and over 35 inches in women, along with high triglycerides and low HDL, is a characteristic of metabolic syndrome, he said, and indicates a high risk of heart disease.

But into the musts, shoulds and don'ts of traditional cardiology, Devries mixes alternative treatments that help his patients. He recently began a two-year fellowship in integrative medicine with Dr. Andrew Weil at the University of Arizona, which has increased his understanding of how our mind impacts our body.

"Stress is linked to cardiovascular risk," said Devries, who may prescribe biofeedback, suggest yoga or massage, or recommend breathing techniques. "I offer aromas, too," he said.

All of these power tools combine to empower patients, which is just what the doctor ordered. Susan Newman, who dodged a potentially fatal bullet, puts it this way. "We learn to do things where we feel we have a sense of control."

— **Carol Mueller**

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CD: Breathing: The Master Key to Self Healing by Andrew Weil, MD; Sounds True Publisher, 2001. This CD describes how breathing techniques can influence your health and includes simple breathing exercises.

Book: "Before the Heart Attacks" by H.Robert Superko, MD; Rodale Publisher, 2003. This book describes the importance of new blood tests that go beyond cholesterol to identify inherited risks.

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