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An extreme makeover of your arteries

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Paul DiMeo

CHRONICLE FILE

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Dr. David McPherson, chief of cardiology at Memorial Hermann Heart & Vascular Institute-Texas Medical Center, says to watch out for these risk factors that can lead to atherosclerosis - the buildup of plaque on artery walls from cholesterol and other bad stuff - and other heart disease.

- 1. Lack of exercise: Recommendation is about 30 minutes daily. 2. High blood pressure: Get your doctor to run the blood test. 3. High cholesterol: Depending on your genetic predisposition, you should start getting it checked as early as age 20. 4. Diabetes: This disease increases the risk factors. 5. Overweight: The extra weight creates extra vessels that can become clogged. 6. Smoking: Don't do it.

For information and a tour of an artery visit: www.athero.com

Q: So why are you so interested in heart-disease education?

A: You don't feel any different apparently until you have the stroke or the heart attack, and at that point it is too late. My biggest goal is just to get people to go to their doctor and get tested. It is the only way you can find out if you have high cholesterol.

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Paul DiMeo likes to talk about his arteries. Recently, the carpenter and designer from Extreme Makeover: Home Edition was in Houston to talk about his battle with high cholesterol, which can lead to plaque buildup in arteries as well as heart disease or stroke. When not working on television dream houses, DiMeo travels the country speaking on behalf of the drug company AstraZeneca and the American Heart Association. DiMeo, 50, talked with Chronicle reporter Tara Dooley about death, diet, high cholesterol and keeping healthy on the job.

Q: What did you think when your doctor said you had a serious problem with high cholesterol?

A: The biggest thing that stuck in my mind was that heart disease is the leading killer among Americans. Bar no other thing, cancer, put them all together, most of us are going to die from heart disease. That is what I remember him saying to me.

Q: Did that freak you out?

A: Of course, because I was also learning about my own mortality. I was turning 44 or 45, realizing, "OK, I'm not going to live forever." I thought for sure I was going to live forever until about then (laughs).

Q: So what did you do?

A: At first I tried to do it all by myself. I tried to eat better, I tried to exercise more. It was like, "My parents take pills every day, not me." I tried to do it on my own, and my cholesterol numbers did not change.

Q: What were you eating?

A: I was eating crap. I was eating what most of us eat.

Q: Like what? Mac 'n' cheese?

A: Certainly a lot of pasta, being Italian. But I was stopping by the local fast food to grab a bite to eat or having two or three eggs in the morning with bacon. But I tried to cut that out and eat more fish, more chicken, more vegetables. Again, my numbers changed by, like, one.

Q: Did that mean you had to get used to the pills?

A: I got used to it. Every night before I go to bed, I take my Crestor. I worked with my doctor on a targeted goal and getting my numbers where they are supposed to be.

Q: Is it hard to keep up the healthful diet on a TV-show set?

A: Everyone comes out, and they want to feed us. They want to feed me. They give us cookies. What better way to win someone's heart than through their tummy? I mean, it's hard to pass up a good biscuit and gravy. But it is no good. You have to get in control.

My schedule is such that there are meals you miss, where all of a sudden it is 11 at night and you are pounding down a cheeseburger because you are starving. Do I still do that sometimes? Of course I do. Do I know it's wrong? Of course I do. Do I try not to do it? Yes.



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