

Scott Shurmur, M.D.

Are people younger than 45 at more risk than previous generations for heart disease?

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It seems to be increasingly so as a matter of fact, and I think there are two main reasons for that. The first is substance abuse. The actual ingestion of cocaine or methamphetamine can trigger a heart attack. And even if that ingestion doesn't cause an event at that point, gradually use over time sort of wears out the heart muscle and replaces it with scar tissue and leads to the development of something we call heart failure, which means the heart can no longer perform at top capacity.

Should parents be concerned about their children's heart if they compete in sports?

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Excellent question and obviously come to the surface more with the unfortunate Damar Hamlin events of last month. The short answer is yes. But the longer answer is, the odds of a catastrophic event like that are infinitesimally small. If the child has played normally and interacted normally and had normal levels of activity throughout their childhood and adolescence, the chance of an arrest or a catastrophic event with competitive sports is minimal. And most organized activities at middle school and above will have some degree of athletic screening. If the child has never fainted with activity, if there's not a family history of fainting, it's quite likely to be safe. But a health care provider will ask those same questions. Do a physical exam, make sure there are no obvious heart murmurs or anything and in selected cases, maybe even do an EKG. If there's no family history of the child passing out while active, no family history of that, and no red flags on a physical exam, then the chances of a cardiac catastrophe are really infinitesimally small.

Can a person look healthy on the outside and still be at risk for heart disease?

2:19

Certainly, and there are some genetic conditions that would qualify for that circumstance. For instance, there's something called familial hypercholesterolemia, either a heterozygous form or a homozygous form. One is sort of partway there and one is fully there. Both forms, results in genetically very high cholesterol levels throughout adult life. So no matter how careful you are with exercise and managing your weight, and avoiding smoking, and all those things, which are all extremely valuable, you may have a genetic condition which markedly elevates your cholesterol. It's not as rare as you might think it's about one in 500. Individuals are maybe a little more common than that. But the good news is if we identify that early in adult life and begin to treat it then most of that excess risk is eliminated.