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STRESS LESS FOR HEART HEALTH, DIETITIAN ADVISES

GREENSBURG, PA, APRIL 6, 2010... Wash the windows, plant flowers, uncover the porch furniture, take to soccer practice, bring home from baseball practice ... aahhh Spring is here! So many things to do.

Stressed yet?

Stress is a normal part of life. “But if left unmanaged, stress can lead to heart disease, high blood pressure, chest pains, and irregular heart beats,” warns Dawn Davoli, RD, LDN, nutrition consultant for Excela Health’s *Golden Hour* Cardiovascular program.

The exact mechanics of how stress contributes to heart disease still remains unclear. Stress itself might be a risk factor for heart disease, or it could be that high levels of stress make other risk factors worse. For example, if you are stressed out, your blood pressure rises, you indulge on high-fat/ high-calorie foods, you lose your desire to exercise, and you may be likely to smoke. Chronic stress exposes your body to unhealthy high levels of adrenaline and cortisol, the stress hormones.

Everyone handles stress differently. For instance, one person may find grocery shopping relaxing and gratifying while another person finds it frustrating and miserable. Knowing what makes you feel stressed is called a “stressor.” “Identifying your stressors and releasing the tensions they cause are the keys to stress management,” notes Davoli. Common stressors include: illness, death, employment issues, personal problems, daily hassles and perfectionism.

After you’ve identified the cause of stress in your life, the next step is to learn coping techniques. Davoli offers these suggestions:

Good nutrition counts. Have a wide variety of foods while trying to limit fat, salt, sugar, alcohol and portion sizes. According to Davoli, “dark chocolate, skim milk, oatmeal, salmon and walnuts are five foods that fight stress.”

Assert yourself. It's ok to say "no."

Stop smoking. Nicotine acts as a stress stimulant.

Get moving. Choose an activity that you like to do, such as walking. Studies show doing regular physical activity lowers your risk of heart disease by lowering the LDL (bad) cholesterol, raising the HDL (good) cholesterol, lowering blood pressure and improving circulation.

Practice relaxation. Try deep breathing, guided imagery, biofeedback, listening to music or yoga. Once you find a relaxation method that works for you, practice it daily for at least 30 minutes.

Take responsibility. Control what you can and leave behind what you can't. Remember, you cannot control people or things, only how you react to them!

Get enough rest. Even with proper eating and exercise, you can't fight stress without rest. The time you spend resting should be long enough to rest your body as well as your mind.

April is "Stress Awareness Month" and Davoli suggests enrolling in one of the many classes and programs Excelsa Health has to offer to manage stress. These classes/programs include: Discover Relaxation Within, Eat Well for Life and Yoga. Call the Excelsa Health Call Center at 1-877-771-1234, or visit www.excelahealth.org to register or for additional information.