



# Take heart, take your meds

## Not taking drugs properly cuts survival: Study

January 12, 2007

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You can diet and exercise all you want.

But if you've suffered a heart attack and don't take your medication properly, then your chances of survival can decrease by 25 per cent or more in the following years, new University of Toronto research suggests.

"While only a minority of patients in this study didn't take their drugs, the mortality impact from that was enormous," says Dr. David Alter, a Toronto cardiologist and associate professor of medicine at the University of Toronto.

"We have a potentially very simple message – take your drugs and you'll live longer."

The study was published this week in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

It looked at 31,455 seniors in Ontario who suffered heart attacks between 1999 and 2003 and showed that simply taking effective drugs on their prescribed schedule could increase chances of survival by at least one-quarter, despite any other lifestyle changes patients might undertake, Alter says.

As many as 20 per cent of the seniors in the study did not take their medications as consistently as they should, he says.

And this non-compliance is likely much higher among younger heart attack victims, he suggests.

"When we start looking at younger populations, those who may not feel as vulnerable after a heart attack, the adherence rates drop off dramatically."

Alter stresses that healthy lifestyle changes such as exercising, eating a healthy diet, and quitting smoking add to the survival rates of people who have had heart attacks.

"It's an important message. It would be bad if patients read this and said, 'Oh, I can take my drugs instead of exercising, or dieting or stopping smoking.'"

Alter adds that people who take their medications religiously are very likely to undertake such lifestyle fixes.

"People who were compliant with drugs we assume would be compliant with other healthy lifestyle changes, regardless of the types of drugs they have."

The study looked at one group of people who had taken medications that had little or no clinical benefit on survival after a heart attack, in particular, calcium channel blockers compared with statins and beta blockers.

Calcium channel blockers control blood pressure and angina, but have no proven ability to increase survival rates after heart attacks.

Yet some doctors still prescribe them to patients in the mistaken belief they have such benefits, Adler says.

The control group that took calcium channel blockers showed little benefit from their drug regimens even if they were followed to the letter.

But those who adhered religiously to instructions for taking statins in particular reaped a 25 per cent survival benefit over those who rarely took the drugs.

Most patients need to take statins or beta blockers indefinitely after their heart attacks, Alter says. Statins, which lower cholesterol, and beta blockers, which help control arrhythmias, are available to seniors free in Ontario.

Alter says the study suggests that health care systems need to find ways to promote drug adherence among the recalcitrant populations.

Dr. Beth Abramson, a cardiologist and spokesperson for the Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation, says adherence is an issue because many patients wrongly believe that modern surgical techniques like angioplasty and bypass surgery have made them well.

"There are misguided in thinking they've had a cure when it's really been a quick fix," Abramson says. "The long-term treatment of people with heart disease is long-term lifestyle changes and medications. It's a message that we need to remind the Canadian public of."

Alter says future studies will look at how much lifestyle changes can add to survival rates on top of drug adherence.

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