Script – Broadcast – The Link between Heart Attacks and Memory Loss

Study Finds Possible Decline in Brain Function Following Heart Episode

A recent study by the American Heart Association (AHA) revealed that some patients tend to suffer memory loss following a heart attack.

The study was actually six long-term studies that observed 31,000 people from 1971 to 2017. At the time they were enrolled, none of the people had yet had a heart attack or displayed any signs of dementia.

The data showed that 1,047 participants, who were followed from five to 20 years and later had a heart attack, showed faster decline in memory, global cognition and executive function in the years after the heart attack compared to those in the study who hadn't suffered a heart attack. According to the AHA, this is one of the first studies to look at how sudden cardiac events like heart attacks affect brain function over the short and long term.

SOT: Dr. Mirza Ali Khan, Family Practice Physician, OSF HealthCare

"With a heart attack the blood is not being properly pumped to the brain so there could be some damage. It doesn't necessarily mean it happens with everybody, it depends on the severity of the heart attack, and exactly how long was the patient without blood flow going to the brain." (:17)

Dr. Khan says one reason for the memory loss is due to the mental health and behavioral changes that take place following a heart attack. Lifestyle behaviors and blood pressure control also contribute.

SOT: Dr. Mirza Ali Khan, Family Practice Physician, OSF HealthCare

"It's always difficult because it's a life-changing event. You have to be on certain medications to protect your heart in addition to change the way you eat and do things in general. You may not be able to move as much physically depending on what you used to do or could do after the heart attack. So making those adjustments isn't easy for everyone – for some it could make them depressed and if you get depressed on top of that – depending on how bad that is – there is some memory loss with depression; it's not an issue with the brain cells it's the depression that could be affecting you." (:36)

Dr. Khan says many people will have their first heart attack in their late 40s or early 50s, but it's not uncommon for some to exhibit problems even earlier. He stresses the importance of following your physician's orders for a full recovery.

SOT: Dr. Mirza Ali Khan, Family Practice Physician, OSF HealthCare

"Some people may do cardiac rehab to help strengthen your heart and after talking to your cardiologist what are exercises you should do. Continue those daily walks or whatever you're able to do, which will improve the blood flow throughout your body. And also learning to deal with stress. That's something we all need to learn to do. That extra stress put stress on the heart but the mind as well." (:31)

Other factors to consider include knowing family history, eating a more plant-based diet, increase physical activity, monitoring blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar and finding ways to reduce stress.

SOT: Dr. Mirza Ali Khan, Family Practice Physician, OSF HealthCare

"I always tell patients if you're doing okay, don't think about it too much. If you keep it in the back of your mind, that's always going to be an additional stressor. As long as you're doing your follow ups and your doctors are telling you that you are doing good, that's a sure sign you're doing fine." (:13)

For more information on heart care, visit OSF HealthCare.