

How Healthy is Your Heart?

by Alyson R. Quinn

Whenever we enter a new year, many of us make wonderful resolutions about how this year is going to be better. The resolutions look great on paper: We are going to lose ten pounds. We are going to get a diploma. We are going to kick those bad habits for good. We feel better just thinking about all the great things we are going to do.

But before we know it, January is almost over, and then February rolls around, and our goals get fuzzy. Actually, by Valentine's Day, we've put on a few more pounds, the enrollment period for GED classes has slipped by, and those bad habits are worse than ever before. Oh well, we say, we can always try again next year.

But what if there wasn't going to be a "next year"? For hundreds of thousands of Americans with heart disease, there won't be.

February is National Heart Health Month, and it's the perfect time to reflect on the sobering fact that heart disease is the number one killer of men and women in America, claiming almost 600,000 lives per year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Preventing Heart Disease

The good news is that four out of five heart disease deaths are preventable with some simple lifestyle changes. Here's some heart-healthy tips to keep you making resolutions for years to come:

- **Get your heart pumping.** An active heart is a healthy heart. Start an exercise club on the yard, do some push-ups before bed, or strengthen your legs by "sitting" against the wall without a chair. (Take it easy, though, if you feel dizzy or in pain.)
- **Skip the salt.** A little salt is good for you, but eating too much of it can raise your blood pressure to dangerous levels. Most prepared foods have plenty of salt already, so put that salt shaker down, and try to skip salty snacks from the canteen. Your heart will thank you.
- **Eat your greens.** As much as you can, steer away from foods that are high in fat. Fill up on fruits, vegetables and whole grains. They contain nutrients that can help keep your heart healthy, without the fats that clog up your arteries like backed-up plumbing.

Of course, that blood-pumping organ in your chest isn't the only heart that needs your attention and care. You also need to look after your metaphorical heart: the center of your thoughts, emotions and will.

A wise person once wrote, "Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life" (Proverbs 4:23, NLT). In other words, you need to keep an eye on your thoughts, emotions and desires, because they can take you places you don't want to go.

Left to our own devices, though, we tend to neglect our hearts.

Just as hundreds of thousands of people ignore the simple steps that could save them from heart disease, we all let our hearts – already so prone to choose what's wrong – get so clogged with corrupt thoughts and desires that no light seems to break through. A prophet named Jeremiah wrote, "The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?" (Jeremiah 17:9, NLT) In other words, says Jeremiah, we've all been diagnosed with spiritual heart disease, and it's just as fatal to our souls as a heart attack is to our bodies.

So what can be done?

A Total Transplant

"Trying harder" to live a good life doesn't work.

If your heart has gotten hardened and dark, it's guaranteed that your actions will be, too. It's just like growing a garden: If you plant corn, you can't grow strawberries. And if there's selfishness, pride, hatred and deception rooted deep in your character, that's what you can expect to see acted out in your life, no matter how often you make great-sounding resolutions to do better.

But there's good news: God offers a cure for our spiritual heart condition. When Jesus was preaching 2,000 years ago, He said, "Healthy people don't need a doctor – sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners" (Mark 2:17, NLT). God is a doctor, and if you know you've got a sin-sick heart, He wants to heal you.

And what is God's cure? He offers a complete heart transplant to anyone who needs it! He says, "I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart" (Ezekiel 36:26, NLT).

To get a new heart, you must respond to God's offer of healing – not by following a list of rules or reciting some religious words, but by putting your trust in God's Son, Jesus, who came to earth and lived as a man, was put to death on the cross to pay the penalty for our wrongdoing, and who God brought back from the grave to break the stranglehold of sin and death over your life. When you place your faith in what He's done to heal you, He gives you the new heart you've been longing for.

So if you're worried about your heart, don't wait for another New Year to come. Talk to your "Doctor" today. ■

