



A MATTER
OF THE
MIND FOR
YOUR
HEART
HEALTH



Saint Valentine's Day may be a commercialised holiday stuffed full of 'heart' shaped chocolates, but it's also a great excuse to start a conversation about your heart health. The Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation team are here to set the record straight on a few matters of the heart, and the unexpected ways you might be at risk.

OUR mind and our heart can often be at odds with each other when it comes to making decisions, but when it comes to our health they're surprisingly in sync. The Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation (GMRF) is conducting research to better understand the mind-heart connection, with the ultimate goal of improving the health of the veteran community. In partnership with RSL Queensland, GMRF's Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Initiative conducted a comprehensive study into the psychological and physical toll of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on a cohort of 300 Vietnam veterans.

The study findings, which are due to be released shortly, paint a clear picture. Contrary to its long-held perception as a 'head issue', PTSD has a significant toll on physical health, and the heart is at particular risk. Initial results of the Vietnam Veteran Study revealed participants who had PTSD reported four times more heart attacks in the past. Added to this, their blood pathology results showed higher triglyceride and lower high-density lipoprotein levels (the 'good' cholesterol), both of which contribute to an increased risk of heart disease.

PTSD Initiative Lead Investigator of the cardiac disease sector, Associate Professor David Colquhoun, was ahead of his time when it came to recognising the intrinsic link between mental wellbeing and heart health. Dr Colquhoun, a clinical cardiologist for over 30 years, was part of a *Heart Foundation Australia Expert Guide* published in 1997, which clearly identified psychological factors, such as depression and social isolation, as contributing factors to the risk of heart attack – independent of physical health issues.

"We were 10 years ahead of the Americans with this study," Dr Colquhoun said. "The results from the trials of more than 9000 patients over a six-year period proved that certain psychosocial factors, such as depression, are as significant as high blood pressure, diabetes and elevated cholesterol in contributing to cardiovascular disease."

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If you're at risk of heart disease, the good news is the damage is often reversible. Lowering your low-density lipoprotein (the 'bad' cholesterol) by even just one millimole can decrease your risk of heart attack by 25 per cent, decrease your risk of stroke by 20 per cent and give you an overall 10 per cent reduction in risk of death. Check out the tips on page 73 to find out how you can improve your heart health. According to Dr Colquhoun, while there are well-documented ways to decrease your risk of heart disease from a physical point of view, the psychosocial factors still remain widely unacknowledged.

“It is often not appreciated by my colleagues that depression is as important as high cholesterol or high blood pressure in causing heart attacks and strokes. I have had a long-standing interest in depression and other psychosocial factors in their own right,



WHAT IS A HEART ATTACK?

Your heart is a muscle that pumps blood around your body. To do this, it needs a continuous supply of oxygen. A heart attack is when an artery that supplies blood to your heart partially or completely blocks, stopping blood flow to an area of the heart. As a result, the heart muscle begins to die. Without early medical treatment, this damage can be permanent. Heart attacks may be referred to as a myocardial infarction (MI), acute MI, coronary occlusion or coronary thrombosis.

Warning signs of a heart attack include:

- Pain, pressure, heaviness or tightness in your jaw, neck, shoulders, chest, back or arms;
 - Shortness of breath;
 - Nausea, dizziness and/or a cold sweat;
 - Indigestion-like pain.
- Have regular GP check-ups and ask your doctor if you have any questions about your health. If you experience the above warning signs, remember, it's always okay to call triple zero.

but specifically as a cardiologist.

“I'm proud to be involved in the PTSD Initiative to help better understand the health issues facing the veteran community. The Vietnam War may have officially stopped decades ago, but many of our Australian veterans are still suffering. Their lives have been destroyed as a result of the psychological trauma,” Dr Colquhoun said.

Dr Colquhoun hopes the results of the PTSD Initiative study will enable future researchers to establish novel therapies for veterans with PTSD. The study will also be used to form the basis of a GP education kit to better equip doctors to better address the psychological suffering associated with PTSD, as well as the various physical

manifestations, such as heart attacks, strokes, liver disease, respiratory disease and sleep disorders.

“There is no point just describing and analysing our veterans' misery. As doctors, we need to do something about it, but we can't do anything if we don't understand the problem. If we can identify the reasons why these things are happening in our patients with PTSD, we can open new vistas for therapy,” Dr Colquhoun said.

Medical research saves lives, but it takes time and money. By supporting the Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation you can be a part of innovative research to improve the health of our communities. For more information on their work, visit www.gallipoliresearch.com.au. ←

TIPS FOR A HEALTHY HEART

THE PHYSICAL

- Exercise regularly. Choose the stairs instead of the lift, walk to the shops... even incidental exercise is better than nothing. Half the risk associated with obesity can be reduced by walking or other exercise for 30 minutes a day.
- Quit smoking. Smoking is a major cause of heart attack, stroke and cardiovascular disease. If you smoke, talk to your doctor or pharmacist about options to help you quit.
- Improve your diet. Choose healthy options, avoid salty food, eat more fish and limit your alcohol intake.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL

- Take stock of your mental health. As part of our Vietnam Veteran Study, participants were asked a series of questions aimed at screening for depression and anxiety. Consider the following questions:
 - During the past month, have you often been bothered by feeling down, depressed or hopeless?
 - During the past month, have you often been bothered by little interest or pleasure in doing things?

If you answered yes to either of these questions, Dr Colquhoun recommends visiting your GP as well as going to www.phqscreeners.com to complete the PHQ-9 screening test for a more comprehensive assessment of your risk of depression.

- Get a canine companion. Studies have shown that dog owners exercise more regularly, have lower stress levels and even live longer. (Note, however, that owning a pet is a bonus, and not a substitute, for the above advice!)

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CARDIAC CARE

The Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation is based at Greenslopes Private Hospital, which offers the most comprehensive cardiac service on Brisbane's south side.

Greenslopes' highly trained doctors and nurses are ready to assist with cardiac emergencies in the 24/7 Emergency Centre, and will transfer any urgent cases directly to the hospital's state-of-the-art operating theatre complex.

Patients who receive treatment at Greenslopes Private Hospital have access to the latest technology and techniques for all acute cardiac conditions. A dedicated Coronary Care Unit offers private, modern rooms, while the Healthy Hearts cardiac rehabilitation program helps patients return to their previous lifestyles through exercise and education.

For the full range of cardiac services, specialists and facilities, visit www.greenslopesprivate.com.au.

