



Vascular Disease – What you need to know

By Chris Valentine, Penrose-St.
Francis Health Services

What if you had the opportunity to sit down with a vascular surgeon, have a cup of coffee and ask him about vascular disease? Would you seize the opportunity? I had the opportunity to sit down with Dr. Thomas Crepps, Jr., a vascular surgeon at Penrose-St. Francis Health Services, and ask him a few questions to find out what all of us should know about vascular disease.

As we started our conversation, I wanted to know, what is the most common vascular problem you treat? Without missing a beat, he said it was carotid artery blockage. When I

thought about this for a moment, it made sense. The carotid arteries are the two main blood vessels that run up through your neck and provide blood to your brain. (They are the ones that you feel when you check your pulse in your neck.)

That led me to my next question, how would a person know if they had a blockage in their carotid artery? Crepps explained that if you experience numbness or weakness on one side of your body, are unable to speak or have a sudden loss of vision in one eye, you should call 911 immediately. In other words, your brain isn't getting the blood it needs and you need medical intervention as soon as possible to fix the problem.

Crepps then talked about the treatment options for this type of

blockage. I was fascinated to learn that most patients are treated with medication. I was surprised to hear this because I expected a surgeon to say that he most commonly uses surgery, not medication. The type of medication you may receive depends on your medical history but some of the ones he prescribes were common things that many of us have heard of, such as Aspirin, Plavix or Coumadin.

Some of the more serious cases, such as people who may have a 70 or 80% blockage, may receive a carotid endarterectomy. This is a surgical procedure that corrects narrowing in the carotid artery. Endarterectomy is the removal of material on the inside of an artery. This is done through an incision in the neck.

While I am glad there are doctors like Crepps who can help us when we find ourselves with a blocked artery, my hope is never to be in that situation. So, I asked him what a person could do to prevent vascular disease. The best way to protect yourself is to understand personal risk and how to manage it. There are two types of risk factors: controllable and uncontrollable. Controllable risk factors generally fall into two categories: lifestyle risk factors or medical risk factors. Lifestyle risk factors, such as smoking, can often be changed, while medical risk factors, such as high blood pressure or high cholesterol, can usually be treated. Both types can be managed best by working with a doctor, who can prescribe medications and advise on how to adopt a healthy lifestyle. Uncontrollable risk factors include your age or having a family history of vascular disease.

My hope in sharing this conversation with you is that you can take the knowledge and information and begin a dialogue with your primary care doctor to talk about your lifestyle and your risk factors. But always know that there are experts at Penrose-St. Francis who are here to help, should you ever need them.

To make an appointment with Dr. Crepps, call 719-776-7600. To learn more about vascular disease, visit www.penrosecariothoracicsurgery.org.