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OPINION

David McGrath: You can run, but you can't hide from heart risk posed by family genes



Author David McGrath gears up for his morning ride. (Marianne McGrath)

By **DAVID MCGRATH**

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Until a recent Tuesday, I often daydreamed I might never die.

I mean, how many other Medicare-eligible men do a hundred pushups and a hundred sit-ups every day, bench-press their weight and can still do a cartwheel?

No brag, just fact, that for the last half century, after quitting smoking and turning my back on my [crapulous youth](#), I never missed a day of running 3 miles a day, 5 on Sunday, till I switched to bicycling in 2012, riding 50 miles a week.

So on the occasion of my annual checkup, when Dr. Lee Anton recommended I get a coronary artery calcium (CAC) test to measure for any buildup of plaque in my arteries, I rose from my chair.

“Are you crazy, Doc? I feel like a million bucks! I will arm-wrestle you right now on this damn exam table.”

My quote, of course, is from the daydream. My actual question to the doctor was that since I had no chest pain or other symptoms and exercised like a madman, why did I need the test?

“Your family history,” he said. He was referring to my father, two of my brothers, and one sister, who all had heart attacks from arterial disease, which I, of course, had been trying to *exorcize* via *exercise* from my DNA my entire life.

As astute newspaper readers know — not to mention friends and relatives of celebrated health guru and highly conditioned athlete Jim Fixx, author of “The Complete Book of Running,” who died in his prime of a sudden heart attack in the middle of a jog — you can run, but you can’t hide from your inherited genes.

Nonetheless, I remained skeptical when the affordable (\$99), painless, noninvasive, 10-minute CAC test identified the left anterior descending artery in my heart as having an accumulation of plaque, better known as the widow maker, which, like a mudslide on a California highway, can narrow or completely block the flow of life-sustaining blood.

After a referral to a cardiologist, I was administered a stress test and an angiogram, a day after which I wrote this group email to my three children Mike, Jackie and Janet:

“Guys, by now Marianne told you I had an angiogram during which a stent, resembling a mesh metal straw, was fished up through my right wrist, up my arm, around my shoulder,

and into a main artery of my heart, a procedure I had not given you a heads-up about, since I thought the whole silly business would turn out negative.

“But now I must admit it was pretty amazing to see it all when the nurse replayed the procedure for me on the X-ray screen: The ‘before’ picture of a section my artery, where only the skinniest trickle of blood had been snaking through, and then the ‘after’ picture with the same section of artery now back to normal, widened and reinforced by the stent, with blood rushing through like the Columbia River.

“So, a surprise heart attack or stroke has been averted. No worries about me fishing on the high seas all alone. And the nurse said I will probably double my per diem mileage on the bicycle.

“Your mother says it’s just my imagination, but I sit here hardly knowing I am breathing since it seems so much more effortless and strong. It’s like I had gotten used to exposure to a hidden dose of kryptonite for the past decade, and Jimmy (cardiologist Sabry Omar) Olsen found and disposed of it.

“Love, Dad.”

As the aforementioned astute readers have already surmised, this essay is not just an excuse to squeeze my family members’ names into the newspaper.

Instead, I write because heart disease remains the leading cause of death in the United States and everyone reading this had a friend or relative who suddenly dropped dead without warning.

What I’ve learned is that “without warning” is a fallacy, since there is, in fact, a warning available, even when you don’t have symptoms, in the form of the cheap, easy and painless calcium test.

The CAC test, which precisely pinpointed the trouble spot in my widow maker, is not covered by all insurance. But if you’re my age or have any history of heart trouble in your family, you should schedule one to give yourself peace of mind.

If the scan shows no trouble spots, you'll be whistling "Don't Worry, Be Happy" the rest of the week. If plaque does show up, an angiogram is the next step, which can ward off a stroke or heart attack.

And don't believe the myths about the pain or risks of an angiogram. I wasn't even anesthetized, yet the sedative the nurse administered made the initial wrist "pinch" to start the procedure forgettable and enabled mellow acceptance, even delight, in all the attention from the medical staff gathered around me.

No longer need I worry about making my eternal departure easier on Marianne, by selling my bicycle, my boat, my fishing rods, my weights, my ice skates, my SUV or my guitar.

Matter of fact, Sweetie, with my new lease on life, what say we update them all with brand-new models?

David McGrath is an emeritus English professor at the College of DuPage and author of the newly released book "[Far Enough Away](#)," a collection of Chicagoland stories. Email him at profmcgrath2004@yahoo.com.