

Some Health Advice for Mother's Day: Balance is the Key

By Gregory S. Cohn, M.D.

Elevated levels of stress are an all pervasive problem, and perhaps no one is affected more in our society than mothers. Who else has to wear so many different hats (single fathers raising children excluded)? When you add to this the frenetic pace of today's world, and the ever-shrinking amount of "down time," you have a recipe for major problems. So, at this time of the year, when we pay homage to our mothers and wives for all that they do, I have some seemingly simple health advice for these women: **do NOT neglect yourself and do MORE to restore balance in your life.**

Some stress is vital and necessary for our bodies and mind to function optimally. However, excess levels of stress can likewise have serious mental and physical consequences. It is important to remember that the mind and body cannot be separated, and that "mental" stress can produce real physical symptoms/problems. It should therefore be no surprise that elevated levels of stress directly contribute to an increased risk for cardiovascular disease. This goes far beyond the presence of a "type A" personality. Our physical responses to stress are largely manifested through the autonomic nervous system, which is **not** under our conscious control. The sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, which make up the autonomic nervous system, have opposing effects, and are normally in balance. Stress activates the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), and results in what are known as "fight or flight" responses (think of what happens when you get very scared). The production of hormones, like adrenaline and cortisol, are stimulated, heart rate and blood pressure increase, and the body readies itself for immediate action. In the short-term these responses are beneficial; however, chronically elevated levels of stress cause over activation of the SNS, an imbalance in the autonomic nervous system, and to potentially devastating consequences.

Over activation of the sympathetic nervous system has been linked to many cardiovascular problems, including increased risks for heart attack, congestive heart failure, sudden cardiac death, and hypertension. It is well known that diabetics suffer from imbalances in the autonomic nervous system, which play a major role in many of the complications of this disease. At a vascular level, an increased sympathetic tone promotes injury to the lining of the arteries and to increased levels of inflammation. High levels of stress also result in many behaviors that adversely effect autonomic nervous system balance. Chief among these are diminished quality and quantity of sleep, decreased time spent exercising, and a tendency towards poor nutrition (all of which result in increased sympathetic activation)

What treatment strategies can be employed to combat these deadly effects? First, it is extraordinarily important that mothers/wives make their personal health a priority and set

aside time that is solely devoted to doing something pleasurable for them. Second, it is paramount that they exercise on a regular basis. While we have all heard this before, regular exercise, by stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system, is one of the best treatments to restore balance in an autonomic nervous system that is out of kilter. Moreover, the “mental” benefits derived from reduced stress levels and the production of a sense of well-being, are just as important as the physical benefits of exercise. Third, do your best to ensure adequate time for sleep. Finally, fight the tendency to take the path of least resistance that stress promotes. Make the effort to eat healthy (don’t settle for comfort foods), engage yourself socially, and do not spend too much time watching television.

Gregory Cohn, M.D. has a concierge Internal Medicine practice in Boca Raton specializing in Cardiovascular Disease prevention and Hypertension. He is one of only 200 physicians nationally Board Certified in Clinical Lipidology (cholesterol disorders). Dr. Cohn has been a board-certified Internist practicing medicine in Florida since 1991. Prior to launching his current practice, he was Medical Director of Cardiac Rehabilitation and Head of the Preventative Cardiology section at Cleveland Clinic Florida - where he spent 11 years as a member of its Internal Medicine Department. Dr. Cohn received his undergraduate degree from Emory University in Atlanta and attended Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia for both his medical education and residency. His interest in cholesterol disorders led him to further study at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Dr. Cohn can be reached at (561)367-7447 or www.gregcohnmd.com.