High-Intensity Workouts: Know Your Heart Before You Start

By Ana-Marija Dolaskie — April 19, 2016

Though we often tout healthy eating and regular exercise as the cornerstones of good health, even the healthiest of people are not immune to the leading cause of death in men and women in the U.S. And although rare, it is worth noting that rigorous exercise could elevate the risk of heart attack in people who may be at risk.

According to the American Heart Association [1], even when the warning signs are there, they’re often mistaken for something else, which is what happened to 37-year-old Alex Small. He told CNN he did not realize he was having a heart attack, but rather thought he had pulled a muscle while working out. After all, he explains, he considers himself an avid runner and athlete, so a heart attack was the furthest thing from his mind.

Although Small's doctors aren't convinced there is a link between his rigorous exercise and his heart attack, they do acknowledge that he may be one out of 1,000 people who may have a higher risk by performing high-intensity workouts.

Though the benefits of exercise far outweigh the risks when it comes to heart health, experts say the risk is elevated when a person is engaged in rigorous exercise. It's often a fatal event triggered by "out-of-control arrhythmia" which causes the heart to stop beating. The majority of exercise-related cardiac arrests occur in people 35 years and older —specifically men — who already have heart disease whether they know it or not. The risk is even higher for men 45 and older, and for women 55 and older.

"Exercise is not a vaccine against heart disease," Michael Joyner, an exercise physiologist at Mayo Clinic, in Rochester, Minn. told the Wall Street Journal [3].

Another worry is that heart disease often goes undetected, which is why risk factors such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol shouldn't be ignored. The risks are much greater for sedentary people who suddenly decide to become fit, and begin with a high-intensity workout to do so.
Those who resolve to get fit in their 50s, 40s, and even 30s should do so cautiously, and consult with a doctor before starting regular high-intensity workouts, especially if there is a personal history of high cholesterol, diabetes, and family history of heart disease.

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[1] http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/HeartAttack/WarningSignsofaHeartAttack/Warning-Signs-of-a-Heart-Attack_UCM_002039_Article.jsp#.VuHbz60UWUI