CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASES

Teashop owner Usman Ahmed suffered a major heart attack in 2009. Following the attack, the father of three was diagnosed with cardiovascular disease and hypertension and put on a regimen of aspirin, statin and blood pressure-lowering drugs. He lives in Delhi, India and earns the equivalent of US$ 4-5 a day.

“It was a terrifying time. I was standing at the teashop and suddenly felt this massive pain in my chest. I was rushed to hospital and the doctors told me I had had a heart attack. The doctors said I was lucky to be alive.

I now have to take drugs everyday to control my blood pressure and am very careful about what I eat. At one point they thought I might need an operation. The operation would have cost around Rs. 60,000 (US$ 1,250) and I simply would not have been able to afford it.”

Usman supports his wife and three children who live in a small village 450 kms away from the capital city, Delhi.

"After the attack, I was unable to work for six months and so had no money. This was very difficult for my wife and family. I had to borrow a lot of money just to get by. If I had died that day I don’t know what would have happened to my wife and children. I am the sole breadwinner and send most of my earning to the village each month for family support.”

Before the heart attack, I had a very unhealthy diet. I would eat a lot of oily, fried foods and a lot of red meat. I was also a heavy smoker and never did any exercise. Today, I eat a lot of fresh food and fruits and have even quit smoking. I also do 30 minutes of exercise each morning and go for long walks in the evenings. I feel lucky that I was able to change my life. Before the heart attack I had no idea about the dangers of smoking or of eating a bad diet. But now I know about bad food habits like smoking, I try and be as healthy as I can.

I actually educate my customers about their unhealthy lifestyles now. “I always say to them: I will charge for the tea but will give you health advice for free!”

CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASES: FACTS

In the South-East Asia Region, cardiovascular diseases cause an estimated 3.6 million deaths or a quarter of all deaths annually.

Modifiable risk factors for heart disease include unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, tobacco use and harmful use of alcohol. These lead to raise blood pressure, raised blood sugar, raised blood lipids and overweight and obesity.

Nearly 80% of premature heart attacks can be PREVENTED by eliminating risk factors such as tobacco use, unhealthy diet, and physical inactivity.

Comprehensive action to reduce the burden of heart disease requires combining approaches that seek to reduce the risks throughout the entire population with strategies that target individuals at high risk or with established disease.