

## Exercise Alone Is Not Enough: The Legacy of Jim Fixx and Heart Disease

By Janet Bond Brill, Ph.D., R.D., LDN  
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If you're a middle-aged runner, you probably remember Jim Fixx. He authored *The Complete Book of Running* (Random House, 1977), the best-selling nonfiction book ever in print at the time of publication. I bought it, read it and savored his advice, which helped launch my own lifelong love of running. But what happened to Jim Fixx? His legacy, if you will, can teach us all a lesson.

### The Story of Jim Fixx

At age 35, Fixx had a sedentary career in publishing, was a two-pack-a-day smoker and weighed in at nearly 220 pounds (he was a notoriously poor eater). He decided to take up running, lost 60 pounds, stopped smoking and went on to author his book. The sad irony is that the man credited with starting America's running boom died of a massive heart attack during a four-mile run on July 20, 1984, at age 52. How could a fellow runner, who was in top physical condition and running 10 miles a day until the day he died, have possibly died from heart disease?

Twenty-three years after his death, heart disease is still the No. 1 killer of both men and women in the United States. In fact, cardiovascular disease (namely, heart attacks and stroke) continues to dwarf all other causes of death, including all types of cancer, lung disease and



Figure 1. This year more than 1 million Americans will have a heart attack (half will die from it) and another 700,000 will have a stroke. Cardiovascular disease is preventable and the time for prevention is now!

diabetes added together! Mention breast cancer and it strikes fear in the heart of most women. Yet the latest statistics show that in 2004, one in 30 women died of breast cancer whereas one in three died of cardiovascular disease.

What we can learn from Fixx's tragic death is that exercise alone is not enough to fully protect

you against succumbing to a heart attack or stroke. You must know your risk factors and, if they are too high, take action to control the ones that can be modified by healthful lifestyle changes.

Keep in mind that heart disease can be prevented. Jim Fixx had several major risk factors for heart disease—some were not under his control, others he could have modified. He had a strong family history (his father died of the disease at age 43); he was a male over the age of 45; his total cholesterol was above 250; and in the weeks leading up to his fatal run, he supposedly had chest pains and other symptoms indicative of smaller heart attacks. An autopsy revealed extensive atherosclerotic disease in his three main coronary arteries, ranging from 70 to 90 percent blockage in each. Thus, Fixx had numerous red flags characteristic of underlying advanced heart disease that, unfortunately, he did not address.

Make no mistake: Runners are at much less risk of heart disease than the general public. Statistics show there is an extremely small risk of dying from a heart attack while exercising. The fact is, fit people live longer. There is no better habit you can adopt for promoting heart health than the addition

of a regular aerobic exercise program. What is important to note is that regular exercisers have a much lower overall risk of contracting cardiovascular disease than inactive people. The beauty of exercise is that it can favorably modify many of the major risk factors associated with heart disease such as high cholesterol, diabetes, obesity and high blood pressure.

So keep on running—just be sure to follow a complete lifestyle plan for the prevention of cardiovascular disease. Consult with your physician regarding your risk for heart disease



Figure 2. Exercise alone is not enough to prevent heart disease. Know your risk factors and take action to make sure they are absent or under control. Eat a healthy diet, keep on running, and live a lifestyle to prevent cardiovascular disease.

and before you begin any exercise program if you have been sedentary or are over age 45.

### Risk Factors You Can Control

The top four risk factors for cardiovascular disease are high cholesterol, cigarette smoking, high blood pressure and diabetes. Sometimes they are referred to as "the apocalyptic four" because a large study found that 95 percent of the people who died from heart disease had at least one of these four risk factors. You can calculate your risk for heart disease by going to the American Heart Association (AHA) Web site (<http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=3003499>) and completing their short Risk Assessment survey. Finally, take action to: (1) stop smoking if you currently smoke; (2) control your blood pressure if it's too high; (3) lose weight if you have type 2 diabetes and are overweight and, especially, if you carry excess weight around the middle; and (4) learn and track your "bad," or LDL, cholesterol number, and if it's too high, get it down!

### Get Your Cholesterol Down

High cholesterol is a major risk factor for heart disease and one that is under your control. Low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, the "bad" type of cholesterol, is the major cholesterol carrier in the blood. A high level significantly increases your risk for a heart attack or stroke. Lower your LDL number and you significantly decrease your risk for a heart attack and stroke. Learn your LDL number and aim to get it down to less than 100 mg/dL, a value described as "optimal" by the AHA. If you are at very high risk for heart disease, the new government recommendations suggest aiming for an even lower number, less than 70 mg/dL.



Illustration: Eileen Eskin Brill

Figure 3. Have your cholesterol checked. Make sure you know your bad "LDL" cholesterol number. Less than 100 mg/dL is "optimal."

If you and your doctor determine that your LDL cholesterol is too high, how do you go about lowering it? According to the government's National Cholesterol Education Program Adult Treatment Panel III Guidelines, the first step is to initiate what is called therapeutic lifestyle changes (TLC), or a healthy diet and exercise program. (Your doctor may also consider adding in drug therapy with TLC depending on your risk and current LDL level.) TLC consists of a food plan low in saturated fat (less than 7 percent) and low in cholesterol (less than 200 mg/day).

How do you eat a healthy diet without sacrificing taste or feeling deprived? You follow a Mediterranean style of eating, filled with whole grains, fruits, deeply colored vegetables, olive oil, nuts, fish, legumes and garlic, all washed down with a nice glass of red wine and topped off with a few small squares of dark chocolate! Even better, use the Mediterranean diet and combine it with the 10 simple food additions and light exercise outlined in my book, *Cholesterol Down* (Crown/Three Rivers Press, December 2006), and you have a powerful, one-two punch in the fight against heart disease that will surely make a dent in your LDL cholesterol!

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Let's all learn a lesson from the legacy of Jim Fixx. Know your risk factors, make sure they are under your control or absent, pay attention to warning signs, get regular physical exams and run safely. Cardiovascular disease is preventable and the time for prevention is now!

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She received her doctorate in exercise physiology from the University of Miami and her master's degree in dietetics and nutrition from Florida International University. Dr. Brill is an ACSM-certified Exercise Test Technologist,

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