



## THE WELLNESS SUTRA

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# MATTERS OF THE HEART

An inherent part of ageing gracefully is staying physically well for as long as possible. I like to think that my old age will be similar to the sprightly 84-year-old man I know. Perhaps you know someone like him too, he's the one who still works and travels extensively. He also finishes most evenings nursing a glass of cognac in one hand as he smokes a Cuban in the other while reading a book.

A happy thought, and one that Aashish Contractor, head of cardiac health and rehabilitation centre, Asian Heart Institute, Mumbai, promptly debunked by telling me that "if we Indians keep up with our current way of life, 1 in 3 of us is destined to die of heart disease".

That's an extraordinarily large number of the population suffering and dying of a heart attack or a stroke. What makes it worse is the fact that we suffer from heart attacks sooner than people in other countries. On an average an Indian suffers from a heart attack when he or she is 53 years old. Compare that with when an American suffers the same fate—at age 59. Western Europeans seem to have it even better, they get their first heart attack at age 63. That's not a small difference when you think about it. These numbers are from the international INTERHEART study where data was collected from more than 12,000 cases across 52 countries, including India. The study was published in the medical journal *The Lancet* on 11 September 2004.

So it seems that 33% of us are destined to die of heart disease, and those of us who develop heart disease are likely to get a heart attack a full decade earlier than our European friends.

The INTERHEART study found something else too. The researchers examined nine health indicators and their effect on a person's chance of getting a heart attack. They collected data on

stuff like smoking, diet, physical activity, blood pressure and blood sugar.

The results came up with another incredible statistic: 90% of first heart attacks are preventable through lifestyle choices, irrespective of your ethnicity, gender and where you live.

This is hopeful, and the news gets better. Latest research on heart health in the US shows that on an average people who keep their heart healthy at age 45, live free of heart disease for 14 years longer than those who don't. This study was led by John T. Wilkins, assistant professor in medicine-cardiology at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, Chicago, US. Wilkins and his colleagues measured total cholesterol, blood pressure, diabetes and smoking and made the comparison between people in whom all four

were at optimal levels with those in whom at least two were not. The study results were published on 7 November this year in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. That's 14 years more of living free of heart disease for those of us who are destined to get it because of family history.

The Wilkins study figured out in disease-free years the difference exercising and eating right can make to your physical health later. The good news is that we are in a position to change our medical destiny, or at least

push it back by several years.

Jyotsna Changrani, assistant professor, New York University School of Medicine, New York, US, says small lifestyle changes can make a big difference to heart health.

"People don't need to run a marathon or become bodybuilders to accrue cardiac benefits. Modest changes can do wonders," she says. Walk half an hour briskly every day. Eat more fruits and vegetables. Take the stairs.

Start making these changes slowly. If you try to make too many changes too quickly, chances are you will get disheartened and give up. Instead, build good habits gradually.

Changrani says if your building is too tall then start by "walking one or two flights of stairs to begin with. It takes about three weeks for your actions to become a habit, and once you are habituated to taking the stairs, you can work your way up to taking more." She also says that "sitting is harmful for your body's metabolism, your body shuts down when you sit". So when you can do something standing instead of sitting, choose to stand. Have standing and walking meetings with your colleagues. Get up from your desk every 20 minutes for a 2-minute walk about.

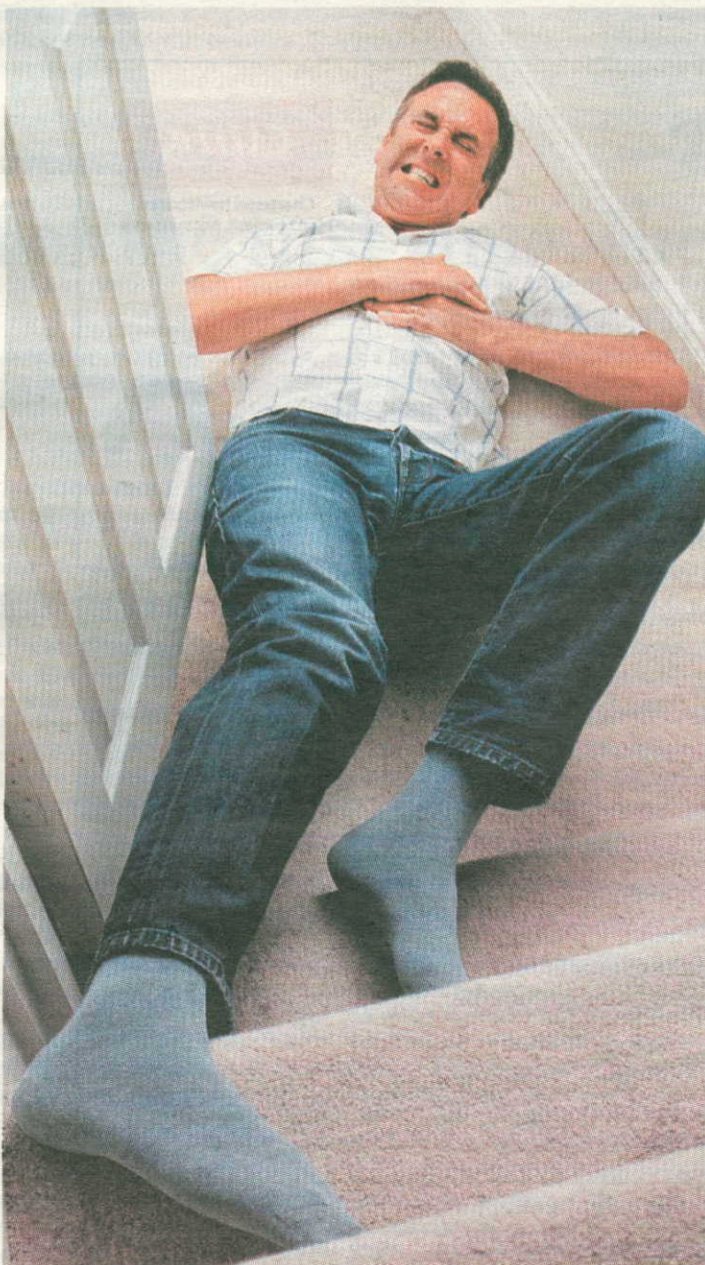
Dr Contractor agrees with these suggestions and adds that, "before you do anything, get to know your numbers first". That's cardiologist-speak for knowing your blood pressure, cholesterol and sugar levels. If they are within normal range, then have them checked annually and commit to moving around more.

If the numbers aren't within range, it's time to go see a cardiologist.

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**33% of Indians are destined to die of heart disease, and those who develop it are likely to get a heart attack a full decade earlier than our European friends.**



**Take care:** Lifestyle changes can prevent about 90% of first heart attacks.