



A GOOD HEART

WHEN A CAR REACHES THE AGE OF THREE, IT NEEDS TO UNDERGO AN INSPECTION BEFORE RENEWAL OF ROAD tax is allowed. This is to make sure that the vehicle is roadworthy. Further more, taxi and heavy goods vehicles are required to undergo more stringent and frequent checks. And if it is discovered that something is out of order, the inspectors will not repair your vehicle - they will simply fail your car. You will then need to bring the car to a mechanic to have the fault repaired.

This is the exact analogy for health screening. We should all undergo a health screening. In general, men should start from the age of 45 and ladies when they reach 55. Of course, there are those who need to start earlier and those who need more stringent tests.

The first area of health that should be assessed is your global cardiac risk. This is easy. All you have to do is to answer the following questions:

- Is there a history of heart artery disease among your immediate relatives?
- Do you have a history of smoking, diabetes or high blood pressure?
- Do you have low high-density cholesterol (HDL) or what is known as 'good' cholesterol?
- Is your 'bad' cholesterol or "LDL" elevated?

If you answer yes to any of the questions above, then you should see your doctor for a health screening. If there is strong family history of diabetes, high blood pressure or heart disease, you may even need to consider health screenings from 30 years of age.

One of the important components of health screening is to detect the presence of heart disease. Generally, a resting ECG and a treadmill stress test would be sufficient. If you are a competitive athlete, it may be beneficial to also perform an echocardiogram of the heart. Studies have shown that most sudden deaths in young athletes are due to structural heart diseases.

In Singapore, there is also the added stress of national service. It may be advised to screen young men before they enter the army, since most deaths during exercise are due to structural heart disease. A simple echocardiogram would be able to pick up these conditions.

In some screening packages, a CT angiogram is an option. This test is particularly good at making sure no blockages are present. However, an abnormal scan doesn't necessarily mean there are definite blockages. Furthermore, minor abnormalities tend to lead to an invasive coronary angiogram, since nobody wants to take the risk of missing significant blockages. Therefore, there are two schools of thought. Some may prefer to do more sophisticated functional tests such as a stress echo or nuclear scan. Some may prefer doing structural scans. Therefore, you should discuss with your doctor which tests are better for you.

If these tests should prove abnormal, you should proceed to seek the opinion of a qualified cardiologist. Delay in doing so may cause you to be exposed to an unnecessary risk of getting a heart attack. ■



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