

Editorial | posted: 8/24/2017 5:54 PM

Editorial: 30 minutes a day that can save your life



Neal Belcher recognized his heart symptoms after hearing a speech at his Elgin workplace. He got surgery to repair his condition and save his life.

John Starks | Staff Photographer

The statistics help tell the story. Heart disease is the No. 1 killer in Illinois. More than 25,000 people in the state died of heart disease in 2015, the latest full year available. Illinois has the 20th highest death rate from cardiovascular disease in the country.

Those are the statistics available from the American Heart Association. In addition, stroke is the No. 3 killer in Illinois -- 5,709 people died of stroke in the state in 2015.

With that as a backdrop, if you or a loved one are suffering any heart or stroke symptoms, it's vitally important that you see a doctor immediately.

That's the message Dr. Agnieszka Silbert imparts when she talks about heart health at workplaces, churches and social clubs and once a week on a Polish radio station. Daily Herald staff writer Elena Ferrarin featured Silbert in an article last week.

"The way I practice cardiology, the most important thing is lifestyle," Silbert said. "It's not just the medication; it's a holistic approach."

Losing weight is one way to lower risk, she notes. But bad sleeping habits mean some people are too tired to exercise. So she gives them tips on meditation, stretching and nighttime breathing machines that will lead to them having more energy to focus on exercises that will help them lose weight.

Ferrarin tells the story of 53-year-old Neal Belcher who ignored troubling symptoms in 2015. He had unexplainable bouts of fatigue, his legs were swollen from water retention and he was short of breath walking from the parking lot to the Elgin factory where he worked.

Only when he heard Silbert list common symptoms of an unhealthy heart did he realize he was at risk. He ended up having open-heart surgery to correct a narrowing of his aortic valve.

"I might have waited too long to see a doctor," Belcher said. "I would probably die."

Think it can't happen to you? Remember this: approximately every 40 seconds, an American will have a heart attack. The same is true for people having a stroke.

So listen to people like Dr. Silbert and pay attention to the warning signs. And look for ways to change bad habits.

For example, in West Chicago, Mayor Ruben Pineda is hosting a monthlong series of walks in September to "get people on the road to a healthier heart."

"I understand that we are all busier than ever with the demands of work, family and social commitments," Pineda said, "but according to the National Forum for Heart Disease and Stroke, if we can find just 30 minutes a day to walk, we may add years to our lives."

Just 30 minutes. Concentrate on that statistic -- for yourself and your family.