

Not bullet proof

By Charles Clines

One thing that many runners believe is they are bullet proof from heart disease, injuries, etc. Well, the fallacy of that thinking was brought home rather shockingly when author/runner Jim Fixx died at a relatively early age of 52. Though, considering his family history, running probably prolonged his life at least 10 years.

And that brings me to something closer to home. Because of my family history on my father's side of the family, I decided to begin running when I was about 40. My father, a smoker, died at age 51 and one of my uncles, also a smoker, died at 48. Even though I didn't smoke, the genes on my father's side of the family apparently weren't designed for longevity. So, I figured I'd better do something to improve my chances of living longer. After reading Fixx's *The Complete Book of Running*, running seemed like a great solution. I had been active in high school by playing football, baseball and golf, and continued to be semi-active after high school by continuing to play golf (walking and carrying my bag). However, I had lost much of my conditioning by age 40. Anyway, to make a long story shorter, I went in recently for a stress test and angiogram and much to my shock, it was determined I had 75 percent blockage in three arteries.

So, I'll be having stents inserted and hopefully I can put off any kind of bypass surgery for at least another 10 years. Plus, I'll be able to continue exercising and running. The reason I went in for a stress test was because I was experiencing a few symptoms that had affected another runner, who was diagnosed with heart disease. I was becoming unable to log longer runs without stopping early and often to walk. When I'd lift weights, I was getting short of breath afterward. And it was becoming almost impossible to get into the condition I thought I should be in with the training I was doing. So, rather than put off a stress test any longer, I scheduled what was described as a nuclear stress test...one that includes radioactive dye inserted in your veins. That test showed that the oxygen going to my heart was lower than it should have been. That led to the angiogram. The good news is that the blockage was discovered. The doctor said that the running probably staved off my problems by at least 10 years. So, no doubt running has been a great benefit, and possibly has even saved my life. However, it also proves that running won't prevent you from having heart disease. Remember, that just because you are in good condition doesn't necessarily mean you are heart healthy.

My advice: Don't ignore checkups, especially if you are experiencing any symptoms as I did. And don't rely on heart rates or blood pressures. My resting heart rate is in the mid to low 40s and my blood pressure is normal to low. And my cholesterol is good. There was no indication of heart disease. I even passed a regular stress test with no problem. So, while regular testing is good, the tests might not discover underlying heart disease. I relied on my symptoms more than the tests. So, be aware of any changes in your conditioning and be sure to tell your doctor. Well, so much for the medical lecture. Just remember, runners aren't bullet proof.