



Five Stupid Reasons Men Die

Men don't take care of themselves. They don't eat right. They push themselves too hard. If something's wrong, they won't tell anyone until they're on death's door. They keep worrisome signs and symptoms to themselves. They don't seem to care if they die young and leave their families fatherless and husbandless. It's too often true, but we guys have some admirable traits, too. We are brave, strong, reliable, and fierce in providing for and protecting our loved ones. Still, we really do die off quicker. So, as a physician, I have devoted a large part of my professional time working around the average man's love of healthcare avoidance.

We encourage our boys to compete in every aspect of life, in school, in sports, in business. The high-earning executive, the lawyer--yeah, the doctor, too--they're all considered a "catch" by both genders. How many men really respect another who's chosen a low-stress/low-paying job because he seeks "personal fulfillment"? And what father would rather his daughter marry a grocery clerk than a high-earning investor?

Yet the grocery clerk may have less job stress and might be able to participate more extensively in the lives of his wife and children. Helping men live longer and healthier begins with understanding our competitive nature, and I would refer any interested reader, man or woman, to two brilliant and eye-opening books by Warren Farrell, PhD: *Why Men Are the Way They Are* and *The Myth of Male Power*.

So what does it take to make the list of stupid reasons for dying? I chose each member of this list for having one of the following two qualities:

Each illness either kills a huge number of people despite the presence of adequate screening and prevention or...

It represents a very uncommon cause of death, but one that is extremely obvious and easy to avoid.

You will likely recall many people, famous, family, or friend, who have died in their prime from one of these five causes. We'll look at each one separately, but first here's my short list of Stupid Reasons Men Die:

1. Dying of Heart Attack or Stroke because you ignored treatable risk factors.
2. Dying of Colon Cancer because of fear of sticking anything there.
3. Dying of Prostate Cancer because you never got the blood test.
4. Dying of Malignant Melanoma because you thought it was a beauty mark.
5. Dying of Sleep Apnea because snoring is just snoring.

Lung cancer is not listed as one of the stupid reasons men die because the vast majority of men know that smoking is likely to cause this disease. They have given an implicit acceptance of this danger by smoking, despite the risk, in exchange for whatever psychological benefits derived, or because of an insurmountable dependency

Stupid Reason #1: The "Big One"

The number one killer in this country is the one we call THE BIG ONE. In the medical business it's called a "cardiovascular event." THE BIG ONE is not some fun sporting match; THE BIG ONE means heart attacks and strokes. They create widows and nursing home residents. They are almost always the result of so-called "hardening of the arteries," a very complex process medically referred to as Atherosclerotic Arterial Disease.



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Men typically develop hardening of the arteries earlier in life than do women. A lot of this has been attributed to the apparently protective effects of the female hormone, estrogen, since it's not until after menopause that the female arteries start to catch up to men. There are a number of risk factors well known to be associated with heart attacks that should be addressed in every man over the age of 30, and even younger men with family history of heart attack or stroke.

The Major Cardiovascular (CV) Risk Factors

1. Hardening of the Arteries. The biggest risk factor is a "yes" answer to this question: Does this person already have hardening of the arteries? People who have already had a heart attack or stroke are at increased risk to have one in the future. People with hardening of their coronary arteries (they feed the heart) or their carotid arteries (they feed the brain) are next in line.

2. A family history of heart disease or stroke among brothers, sisters, parents and children, and to a lesser degree among grandparents and blood-related aunts and uncles, is the second biggest risk factor for THE BIG ONE. Regardless of whether a man has a perfect cholesterol level or blood pressure, if he has two brothers dead from heart attacks, he is a walking time bomb until tests prove otherwise.

3. Elevated Serum Cholesterol! Everyone in the country knows about this evil substance. It's on television, in our health magazines--just about anywhere people share their opinions, and it's fueled some of the most lucrative food and diet marketing strategies in history. And it's wrong! The majority of people who experience heart attack or stroke have normal levels of cholesterol. Still, most of these victims likely would have fared much better had they been on cholesterol lowering drugs.

The patient's total cholesterol is best if below 200. More importantly, LDL (bad cholesterol) should be less than 130. HDL (good cholesterol) should be above 40 for men and above 50 for women. Triglyceride level should be below 150. This said, failure to treat elevated cholesterol by the most effective means--medication, can greatly contribute to the death of an otherwise healthy man.

4. High blood pressure, also called hypertension. Blood pressure, while necessary to keep blood flowing through the pipes, can be at a level that is too high for the long-term wear and tear on those pipes. Coronary arteries, the small arteries that feed the heart itself, never get a chance to stop and take a break--the heart works 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Elevated blood pressure in this system can cause atherosclerotic changes in these arteries leading to heart attack and death.

5. Smoking. Realize that the risk of a heart attack caused by smoking one cigarette a day is almost the same as that from smoking a pack a day. Cutting down doesn't help very much. You have to stop. This is different from the risk smoking adds to getting lung cancer, wherein cutting down greatly reduces your chances of that disease. Heart attack and stroke are less about how much you smoke in a day and more about the fact that you smoke at all.

6. Diabetes is being redefined in modern medicine, not so much as a disease which one has or doesn't have, but rather as a late complication of a more insidious, subtle, and invisible process known as insulin resistance. Proper diabetic screening requires not only a fasting glucose test, but also evaluation for potential insulin resistance by checking first a fasting and then a post-breakfast blood insulin level.



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7. The final major risk factor is the male gender itself. There's not a lot we can do about this one.

Other emerging risk factors are becoming better understood and more widely checked. They include the following: homocysteine, lipoprotein A, fibrinogen levels, highly sensitive C-reactive protein, Plasminogen Activator Inhibitor, Apoprotein-E Genotype, Interleukin-6, TNF, and my current favorite, LDL and HDL Gradient Gel Electrophoresis.

A vital screening tool, in my opinion, for all men and women is direct imaging of the coronary vessels for hardening of the arteries. The ultra high-speed electron beam CT scan (HeartScan) is now being used to create a detailed image of the heart to determine if someone has significant hardening of the arteries. For an in-depth description of this amazing and painless test go to www.drjohncorso.com

Please understand that no amount of dieting and exercising will prevent a man from having his heart attack or stroke if the above mentioned screenings and related treatments are omitted.

Stupid Reason #2: The Toughest "Sell" in Medicine

Unlike lung cancer, colon cancer is one of the stupidest cancers on the planet and should no longer have any chance to kill the average American man or woman. It starts as a slow-growing, low grade, obvious tumor and takes years to ripen into a killer that spreads everywhere and then kills you. The one trick it uses is stealth. It hides in a place that people hate to have searched. Classic tortoise and hare: the colon cancer tortoise patiently plods onward while we silly hares procrastinate. We put off an admittedly unpleasant colonoscopy because we can't face it or we refuse to pay for it. Stupid!

Stupid Reason #3: Please, Not That End Again

Prostate cancer is not quite as slow growing as the easily curable early stages of colon cancer, but in most patients it is easily picked up in a curable form through routine testing. Make sure to get the PSA blood test every year. This alone could save tens of thousands of lives annually. It's best to have the proverbial "finger wave" (rectal exam) and the PSA test every year after the age of 40, but if I could only choose one, the blood test is the more sensitive screening method.

Stupid Reason #4: The Beauty Mark From Hell

The next cancer, malignant melanoma, also applies equally to men and women and uses a killing strategy exactly the opposite of the tortoise and hare strategy employed by the more laid-back colon cancer. Melanoma hides in plain site. Unlike colon cancer, it moves like a bat out of hell. It's an easily discovered black spot, (at times ironically termed a "beauty mark") which has a predictable way of growing and can be easily removed if discovered in time. All that's needed is an occasional look in the mirror or the watching of our mutual backsides by one another.

Stupid Reason #5: Dangerous Sleep

The final Stupid Reason to die on my top-five short list is a common sleeping problem called obstructive sleep apnea--deadly snoring. About 6% of all American males suffer from this sleep disorder, but few die as a result of it. Sleep apnea (translates as "sleep no-breathing") leads to the mechanical cutting-off of the air supply when neck muscles go slack during deep sleep. The resulting intermittent low oxygen levels cause long-term damage to the lungs. Over the course of many years that damage leads to heart failure and death. Besides the snoring, a chronically fatigued, sleepy life is common because the brains of these patients won't allow them to remain in a deep sleep for more than a minute or so. Impending suffocation causes the person to move back to a much lighter sleep to better keep the airway open. So, even though patients may sleep 10 hours a night, they still wake up tired and fall asleep easily and often during the day.

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