



THE SILENT PREDATOR

When my paternal grandfather was about my age (49), he suffered a fatal heart attack while driving and drove his car through the front of a building. At the age of 66, my father suffered his first stroke, followed by a second. These strokes significantly reduced the quality of the last 15 years of my father's life. One of my father's younger brothers survived a cerebral aneurysm when he was about my age. My father's youngest brother died of a heart attack when he was my age.

Aware of this family history, I have tried to take care of myself. When I was growing up, playing sports was my passion. I exercised regularly until my mid-30s. Numerous sports injuries suffered in my youth now prevent me from running and engaging in other forms of sports and exercise that I used to enjoy.

During the past decade, I have spent more time driving my daughters to their sports practices and competitions, helping coach their teams, and watching them play than I have spent exercising myself. Although I gained 30 pounds over the 32 years since I graduated from high school, I have managed to keep my weight stable for the past ten years. At my annual physical a year ago, my blood pressure was 124/82. I believed I was holding my own.

Then one especially stressful day, my brain felt as if it were pressing against my skull and I felt a little light-headed. I continued to feel that way throughout the afternoon, so I stopped by my doctor's office. The first thing the nurse did after leading me back to an examining room was take my blood pressure. It was 181/105. She asked me to relax for 10 minutes and then retook my blood pressure. It was 180/104. She made an appointment for me to see my doctor the next day.

When I saw my doctor the next morning, my blood pressure had dropped but was still elevated in the hypertensive range. He advised that we monitor

my blood pressure for three or four weeks before deciding whether to start me on medication to control it. At an unrelated optometry appointment later that week, my optometrist showed me a photograph that revealed signs of stage one hypertension in the small blood vessels of my eye.

After my blood pressure spiked, I began exercising almost daily. I also changed my diet. When I returned for a follow-up visit with my doctor a month later, I was 10 pounds lighter and my blood pressure had returned to the 120s/80s range. I was not required to begin taking any medication for hypertension. My challenge now is to maintain my exercise and nutrition regime in order to retain the gains and benefits I have achieved.

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