

Dr. Dan practices what he preaches

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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UNMC cardiologist drops 50 pounds, counsels patients to maintain healthy weight.

Dan Anderson is a man on the run.

These days, however, it's a healthier sprint as the Gothenburg-born and raised cardiologist rises at 4:30 a.m. and heads to the gym where he runs, swims or lifts weights.

By 6 a.m., the 46-year-old is at work at the University of Nebraska Medical Center where he's an assistant professor of medicine in cardiology.

It was a massive drop in weight—50 pounds—that recently landed him an interview with KETV in Omaha.

“Essentially, this came about by seeing patients who were in their 40s and were having heart attacks,” he explained.

Anderson clearly remembers a young man who was his age with a daughter and wife at his bedside who were frightened of their father and husband having a heart attack.

“I quickly realized I was on that pathway and decided to do something about that.”

Anderson had always been thin until about age 30.

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“All you can eat in the cafeteria will kill you along with poor eating and no activity,” Anderson said.

In keeping a heart healthy, he said the most important thing a person can do is eat right and watch calorie intake to maintain a healthful weight.

Exercise is also necessary—three to four times per week to increase heart rate for 30 minutes.

“The inability or lack of exercise is not an excuse to not lose weight,” Anderson explained.

For example when he mounts the treadmill three times a week, he runs for 24 minutes—or three miles—and burns about 400 calories.

When he was overweight, Anderson admits to sitting and eating almost 6,000 calories at a time.

“That’s enough calories for three days even with my workouts,” he explained.

Anderson describes healthy weight maintenance as a simple in-out game.

“If you put it in you mouth, you either need to burn it or it will be added to your body as fat and the more fat you have, the more risk of cardiovascular problems you face,” he explained.

Anderson tells his heart patients to record everything they eat and decrease the intake of those food choices until they start losing weight.

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“When patients do this, they quickly realize—as I did—that they have not been honest or have not realized just how much food and calories they eat,” he said. “It’s very sobering.”

Americans eat too much and consume too many calories.

While the average person needs about 1,800 to 2,000 calories a day, Anderson said many Americans eat half that amount in a single meal.

What is eaten during other meals and snacks quickly adds up, he said.

Another problem is that food today is often more calorie dense and portions are much larger.

Buffets are the worst for maintaining a healthy heart.

“I would rather leave leftovers on the plate—or not take them in the first place—than eat them, gain weight and put my health at risk,” he said. “We tend to want to get our money’s worth but that often translates into weight gain and health risks.”

In Nebraska, Anderson said eating habits, genetics, the invention of fast food and lack of exercise or working it off on the farm= have increased cases of heart disease.

“Individuals clearly need to eat better and exercise,” he said, noting that people wanting to make healthier changes should see their doctors first to insure risk factors for heart disease are managed such as high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol and smoking cessation.

People have the ability to change their risk profiles, Anderson said, but most simply don’t do it until it’s too late.

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In addition to practicing what he preaches to patients, the doctor also is involved in electrophysiology and teaching and research.

Anderson described cardiac electrophysiology as the science of the mechanisms, functions, and performance of the electrical activities of specific regions of the heart.

His research is in molecular and cellular immunology with a specific focus in innate immunity (preexisting immunity) and how such immune responses contribute to the mechanisms of cardiovascular disease processes.

Specific clinical interests, he said, include understanding the aspects and contributing factors involved in both atrial and ventricular arrhythmias.

“Such arrhythmias are conditions in which the electrical activity of the heart is irregular or is faster or slower than normal,” Anderson explained.

That interest, he said, may have evolved from having a father who’s an electrician.

“I have always enjoyed helping him doing jobs and often joke that I am a heart electrician,” Anderson said.

The work ethic instilled in Anderson while growing up in Gothenburg and a “can do” attitude has been the basis for success and has helped him in medicine probably more than anything.

“Medicine is not conceptually hard but mastering medicine and the art of medicine takes time and sustained effort,” he explained. “Fellow students who did not finish medical school did not have the ability to stay with the long process.”

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Anderson didn't set out to become a doctor.

After graduation from Gothenburg High School in 1980, he planned to farm and raise hogs.

Instead he worked at Monroe Tenneco in Cozad for three years before deciding to go to college at the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

"My mom was a nurse and I was always interested in medicine," Anderson explained. "That clearly gave me a perspective and helped me decide on medicine."

As an undergraduate, he worked at Good Samaritan Hospital in Kearney as a phlebotomist. That was the final factor in his decision to become a doctor.

Since he became a doctor, the cardiologist said research and medical management are the most significant developments in the treatment of heart disease.

"Aspirin, statins (drugs to reduce fat levels), ACE (blood pressure medicine), and beta-blockers have made remarkable improvements in the quality of life and in prevention of disease," he explained. "Continued research on the benefits and approaches to how we can best manage disease is of great importance."

When he's away from the office and the gym, Anderson loves to mountain bike, fish and do yard work.

Describing himself as handy, Anderson enjoys doing projects around the house like building a deck last summer.

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“I truly learned a lot about doing things yourself by growing up on the farm because we virtually did everything ourselves on the farm as most farmers do,” he said.

The most difficult thing about being a cardiologist, he said, is balancing time.

“But I still say my dad on the farm works harder than I do,” Anderson said. “I always tell everyone I know that nobody works harder than farmers.”

Anderson is the son of Don and Sandra Anderson who still live on the farm.

He is married to Kari who is a pediatrician. They have two daughters: Ashdyn, 9; and Jordan, 8.

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