

# the crew

[www.yotcru.com](http://www.yotcru.com) REPORT



# The Silent Stowaway



**Coronary heart disease (CHD) is something that you only need to worry about if you are old and obese, right? Not necessarily. As a busy crewmember with high levels of stress over charters you could tick more of the risk factor boxes than expected, so it is important to know what these are. Bring in the fact that many guests or owners are elderly or high-risk for heart attacks and there are even more reasons to know about CHD. Paulo Alves MD explains the symptoms and risk factors involved.**

**C**rewmembers, yacht owners and guests, beware. You may be bringing far more than your luggage onboard during each yachting voyage. Even if you feel “fine”, coronary heart disease (CHD) might already be at work, smouldering beneath the surface with no apparent signs or signals.

While there is no single cause for heart disease, certain risk factors have been proved to contribute to the development of cardiac complications:

- Genetic predisposition/family history.
- High cholesterol.
- High blood pressure.
- Diabetes.
- Smoking habit.
- Sedentary lifestyle/low physical activity .

The good news is that you can control and, in some cases, totally eliminate some of these risk factors, decreasing your overall chances of experiencing heart disease.

If you are a smoker, you can enroll in a smoking cessation programme or choose from among a number of over-the-counter aids such as patches and chewing gum – or even hypnosis. The most important prevention is to quit smoking.

Those with low physical activity levels can improve their health tremendously with just 30 minutes of aerobic activity three times a week. All forms of activity – ranging from walking, jogging and hiking to swimming, rollerblading and cycling – can significantly reduce, if not eliminate, some risk factors.

Likewise, high blood pressure

(hypertension), cholesterol and diabetes can today be controlled not only through diet and lifestyle changes, but also with effective drugs prescribed by your doctor.

Although a normal blood pressure reading (the pressure exerted by circulating blood on the walls of blood vessels) is 145/90 and a healthy cholesterol level is 200, a doctor will consider other risk factors when determining a specific treatment protocol. In some instances, the doctor may choose to treat in-range or moderately high cholesterol or blood pressure, based on the number of additional risk factors. The more risk factors you have, the greater your risk.

While you have no control over your genetics, sharing your family history and lifestyle choices is the first step towards helping your doctor understand your true risk and whether your “I feel fine” attitude today could change dramatically tomorrow.

## **The mechanics of a heart attack and external symptoms**

Coronary heart conditions develop over time, with no external symptoms, as deposits of fat and cholesterol accumulate in the artery walls. The deposits can break and initiate the formation of a clot that further obstructs the affected coronary artery and results in heart attack (myocardial infarction).

When blood flow to a particular region of the heart is obstructed, that portion of heart muscle may die. As a result, the final outcome can include sudden death, due to the heart’s altered,

abnormal electrical activity. A person surviving this acute phase may still have disability. Depending on the amount of damaged muscle, heart function could be jeopardised, leading to eventual heart failure.

The most common symptoms of heart attack are pressure and weight in the chest that often radiates into the shoulders, arms and jaw. Nausea and cold sweating also are frequently present.

## **Decreasing your risks**

The *only* safeguard against CHD is to take action *before* you have a heart attack by controlling your risk factors. Crewmembers and frequent yacht travellers on the remote seas should pay even more attention to their heart disease risk factors due to their remote location and lack of critical immediate access to medical facilities.

If you experience any symptoms of chest discomfort – especially if you have a series of heart disease risk factors – these warning signs should never be ignored. They are a clear signal to contact a doctor or telemedicine provider immediately, since prognosis is better when treatment is provided in less than six hours from the beginning of symptoms.

*Paulo Alves MD is Vice President Aviation and Maritime Health with MedAire, assisting with MedLink Global Response Center medical case reviews, medical industry presentations and client support. He is also a trained cardiologist. [www.MedAire.com](http://www.MedAire.com)*

*Image courtesy of Istockphoto.com*