February is Heart Month

I have been pondering what new information I could include in our employee newsletter about this subject. Most of us are already well aware that heart disease is the #1 cause of death in America. Yet many of us continue to indulge in the very things we are told to avoid. The scientific evidence is overwhelming: we are shellacking our arteries with plaque. Too many of us avoid the “E” word (exercise), which would at least counteract to some degree our poor food choices. We fool ourselves into thinking tomorrow will be different, or rationalize that we all have to die someday. However, when symptoms appear we realize we don’t want to die prematurely or suffer along the way. Then we see a doctor to try to fix it with costly medications that can have nasty side effects. That road was all too familiar to one of our fellow employees. Please be sure to read his inspiring story in Sharing Corner.

A famous Chinese proverb states that “A journey of 1000 miles begins with one step”. What one step can you take today to steer your life in the direction of heart health? Read on for some simple suggestions.

Know Your Risk

If you would like to start by gauging your own risk for heart disease, the American Heart Association has a calculator at this Million Hearts website. You do need to know some results of lab work, and your blood pressure to complete the survey. While I can’t you give you the numbers from your lipid profile I can give you a current blood pressures reading.

Blood Pressure Screenings

I will be offering Blood Pressure screening on the following dates:

- 2.19.2013 AMS  5th and 6th periods (Teachers’ Lounge)
- 2.20.2013 AHS  5th, 6th, 7th periods (Teachers’ Lounge)
- 2.21.2013 Preschool  11:30 a.m.—12:00 p.m.
- 2.21.2013 CO  12:00—12:30 p.m.
- 2.22.2013 East  8:00—9:00 a.m.
- 2.26.2013 West  8:00—9:00 a.m.
- 2.27.2013 Morrison  8:00—9:00 a.m.
- 2.28.2013 The Plains  8:00—9:00 a.m.
The Love Connection

The journal of Psychosomatic Medicine reported on a study done by UCLA life scientist using brain imaging that revealed providing support to others offered health benefits to the giver as well as the receiver. The ventral striatum that is activated with rewards like money, sex and chocolate is also significantly more active when giving emotional support to others. Another part of the brain, the spectral area which helps reduces stress, also became more active. In the book *Why Kindness is Good for You*, Author Dr. David Hamilton points out that when you do something altruistic your brain produces more dopamine, which is the “feel happy” hormone. Dopamine is an antidote to the stress that comes with life. A plethora of research has connected chronic stress directly to heart disease and we all know that indirectly, via the need for comfort foods when we have had a tough day. On that note, I am putting in a couple of plugs for upcoming opportunities to give whence you can get a “hit” of Dopamine.

Dancing with the Athens Stars

The 6th annual Dancing with the Athens Stars will be held on April 13, 2013, and your very own school nurse will remove her lab coat, don high heels (hard to imagine) and take to the dance floor to raise money for the American Red Cross. You can support Janalee and all the good works of this important organization by writing a check made out to the Red Cross with *Stock and Brock* in the memo line. In the near future there will be a website link to do this online as well. Checks can be put in the envelope in each building’s main office. If you are interested in tickets for the event, please call Joni Hodgson at 740-707-8004 ASAP (they sell out quickly). Also, last year’s winner, retired West Elementary teacher *Stevie Woodell* will also be doing an exhibition dance that night!!

2nd Annual Forget-Me-Not 5K Run/Walk in Memory of Patsy

Another opportunity to make your heart sing and your own feet swing, will be the 2nd Annual Forget Me Not 5K Run/Walk in memory of our beloved Patsy Barrington on April 20, 2013 at the West State Street Ballpark. Half of the profits for this race will go to our elementary school cross country running clubs and the other half will go to the Appalachia Community Visiting Nurse Association Hospice and Health Services (ACVNAHHS). Last year there was a huge turn out, and once again director Liz Schwarzel has some unique touches planned to make this an extra special day.

Donations in Memory of Debbie Lewis

Last but not least, Debbie Lewis made a request for donations to ACVNAHHS or West PTO in her memory. When I started working for Athens City Schools almost 20 years ago, Debbie was the person who basically said, “I’ve got your back.” She helped me in countless ways and I know I am not that the only one that depended on her. I thought of her as my angel disguised in work clothes. It’s hard to take the sting away from death, but as I write out those checks I know my heart will be soothed with a big dose of love.
The Medicinal Power of Food

When it comes to heart health, foods high in Omega 3’s do truly function like medicine. A few of the benefits are reduced inflammation throughout the body, prevention of excessive blood-clotting, lowered amounts of lipids (triglycerides and cholesterol) circulating in the bloodstream, inhibition of thickening of the arteries, stimulation of the secretion of leptin, a hormone that regulates food intake, body weight and metabolism. While you can take fish oil supplements, research indicates that Omega 3 may be better absorbed from food. Here is a list of the world’s healthiest foods high in Omega-3 fats: ground flax seeds, walnuts, salmon, sardines, grass-fed beef, soybeans, halibut, scallops, shrimp and tofu.

Saw Some Logs — The Importance of Sleep

Getting solid sleep is a protective factor for your heart health, apparently because some of the main factors associated with poor sleep contribute to other serious conditions. Sleep apnea is a common disorder where you have one or more pauses in breathing or shallow breathes lasting anywhere from second to minutes while you sleep. This can impair the body’s endocrine system, causing the release of the hormone ghrelin, which in turn makes you crave carbohydrates and sweets. Obstructive sleep apnea is a risk factor for high blood pressure, and people who have this problem are also more likely to suffer heart attacks and die in the middle of the night. They are also at higher risk of strokes and atrial fibrillation. Sleep apnea often goes undiagnosed. Most people who have sleep apnea don't know they have it because it only occurs during sleep. A family member or partner might be the first to notice signs of sleep apnea. Do you feel routinely very tired during the day? Have others noticed you stop breathing at times while sleeping, or that you choke or snort throughout the night? If so, it would be a good idea to seek medical advise.

Exercise— A Little Goes a Long Way

Here are the current recommendations for cardiovascular fitness: 30 minutes of moderate intensity aerobic activity five to seven days per week or 20 minutes of high intensity training three days per week. Examples of this aerobic activity are walking, jogging, swimming laps, cycling, dancing and other rhythmic activities as long as movement is continuous. The results of our fitness survey are in. Thanks to everyone who filled out the survey on fitness needs. Nothing earth shaking was revealed, but the results will be shared with Wellworks and we will do our best to renew our corporate membership next year. One person asked why we couldn’t have the same discount at the Athens Community Center. Wellworks approached us many years ago, as a part of their overall mission to encourage a healthier community. Currently, the Community Center doesn’t have this same kind of arrangement with corporate sponsorship. 48.7% of the 81 respondents did state group classes were their preferences for exercise, and it appears from survey results many of you were unaware that these classes are free as a member of Wellworks. Many of you shared that fitness classes at your building site would be best. Having a buddy to exercise with, was also very important. Jamie Bettit, a West parent is willing to do Campfit on site, as long as there are enough participants. Please, let me know if your building is interested in Campfit or any other afterschool activity in your building.
My Road to a Healthier Me ~ Wayne Horsley, AHS

In April of 2012, I was diagnosed with Type II diabetes with an A1c of 8.2. For several years, I knew I was flirting with “high normal” numbers and I always left the doctor promising that I was going to make the necessary changes and that I did not need medications. This promise would last a couple of days or at best maybe a week, as I’d pass on that bag of chips for an apple, or would actually see if that elliptical in the basement actually worked. But overall, those were simply empty words and promises unfulfilled.

My father passed away at the age of 56 from complications of diabetes. I have also watched a couple of my students’ parents suffer painfully before succumbing to the disease and like many others, I have friends who battle the disease daily. Not until that April morning (April 29, 2012) while I sat in that chair in the examination room did I realize that this situation is real. When the doctor showed me the numbers from my blood work, my body literally went numb. All I could think of were the friends that I knew who had lost toes, legs, and lives to this horrid disease, or my own father who died from Diabetic Ketoacidosis, in what was a gruesome and tragic scene. Never at a loss of words, and seldom without a quick wit or jab, I was truly speechless as I sat in a self-reflecting fear, realizing that I was heading down the same path that my father and thousands of others have taken, few with happy end results. This was my wake-up call, so to speak, and my revelation of how fragile life really is and that this is truly the one and only body that we have. I started doing the calculations and discovered that I was roughly the same age as my father when he contracted the disease. Within 15 years of his diagnosis, he was ravaged and deprived of his life. I calculated how old my children would be, imagining possible grandchildren and even thinking about how young and beautiful my wife would still be. I knew at that time, at that moment that something had to change. Not tomorrow, not on Monday (the trap that so many of us fall into) but today!

After having conversations with my physicians and with an endocrinologist, I spent hours researching diets and the effects that different foods and food types have on the body. I began immediately testing my blood sugar levels, twice a day as directed, and immediately began exercising. I recall vividly the overwhelming feeling of buying all my testing equipment and going through the steps of testing and recording my daily blood glucose levels, as well as reading all I could regarding acceptable levels by the American Diabetes Association. One thing that stood out to me was my physician’s “goals” for me. The goals for my blood glucose levels were above what the medical community would call “normal.” Why the physician would set the goal to be to bring my glucose levels down to a “pre-diabetes” stage and not to “normal” levels was something that I could neither understand nor accept. My “goals” were set at being normal, and the immediate prescription of medications was personally unacceptable. Both my physician and endocrinologist wanted my fasting sugars below 120 (below 100 is normal), and my 2-hour post meal sugars at below 140 (120 is normal).
Immediately, I rid the kitchen and pantry of any foods with high-fructose corn syrup, all processed flours, and non-naturally occurring sugars. I purchased vegetables, fruits and low carb yogurt. I also cut back on the red meat, introducing more fish and meatless meals into my daily diet. From that first day in April, my blood glucose started declining. First they went down to the 140’s 2-hour post meal and 120’s fasting. That’s when I realized that I could do this!! For me, being “pre-diabetic” was not really good enough. Staying with a diet that focused on 2,000 to 2,200 calories daily and introducing 30 to 40 minutes of cardiovascular exercise into my daily routine delivered fast results in both my blood sugars and my weight. Within one month, I was reaching the 80’s on my fasting glucose, and 115 2-hour post meals. Within two months I had dropped 25 pounds and had reduced my waist from a 42/44 to a 38. By July, I had run in five 5K races and a couple of 1 mile runs, I was hitting the elliptical every day and I had reached 40 pounds of weight loss (weighing in at 215lbs, which is what I weighed graduating college) and was in a size 36 waist in pants. Today I am in a size 34 waist in pants!

My three month check-up was delayed until early August and my goals were simple. I wanted to be approaching the bottom end of “pre-diabetes” coming in around a 5.7 on the A1c, lower my cholesterol to acceptable levels, and reach 50 pounds of total weight loss. Getting the results of that first blood test that read 8.2 on the A1c was an eye-opening and shocking experience that had driven me to change my lifestyle. The results of the second blood test proved to be a validation of my dedication and determination. I recorded an A1c of 5.2 (normal). My HDL cholesterol rose from 32 to 39 (I still have work to do in that area). I also dropped my triglycerides from 288 to 88 and my total cholesterol from 280 to 220. The fact that I am most proud of is that this has been done without any medications of any type — no pills or shots. That was my goal and will continue to be my goal.

With these results and feelings of success, one could easily relax and go back to the things that created the problem in the first place. However, I have maintained my focus and resolve. In November my A1c was a stellar 5.1 and my cholesterol was still improving. The physicians wanted to remove me from my Blood Pressure medications, which I have taken for 14 years. However, I decided to wait until after basketball season to visit that decision.

Overall, this is still a daily challenge. It is a major lifestyle change and not a fad diet or a quick fix. I am always willing to tell my story and lend my experience with those who are experiencing the same issues and having to make the same choices. I recognize that this is a journey, not a destination. It is a continual path to a healthier and longer life.