

Newsletter article February 2007
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February is traditionally associated with the expression of love through gifts of poetry, cards, candy and flowers. It's a great month to focus on issues related to the classic symbol of love, the heart.

A frequent symptom indicating a cardiac problem is chest pain. Chest pain develops when arteries of the heart become blocked and blood flow is interrupted or halted. Medications and lifestyle changes often can reduce the effects of artery blockages, however, in many cases coronary angioplasty and stenting may be necessary.

Angioplasty can reduce symptoms related to blocked arteries and is often used during a heart attack to open an artery and prevent heart damage.

Prior to the procedure, a dye is injected into the bloodstream, which allows the arteries and areas of blockage to be visualized. With coronary angioplasty, a thin flexible tube, or catheter, is passed through an artery in your groin or arm to reach the arteries in your heart.

A small balloon at the end of the catheter is inflated to open up and stretch the blocked artery to improve blood flow through that area. Afterwards, the balloon is deflated and the catheter and balloon are removed. The doctor may choose to insert a tiny, mesh coil, called a stent to help prop the artery open and to prevent re-narrowing. The stent supports the arterial wall, and is placed permanently. Individuals may have one or more inserted. After stent placement, patients are usually treated with medications, which reduce the chance of blood clots forming on the stent and also, relax the coronary arteries. Some stents are pre-coated with a medication that is released slowly, over time, to prevent clotting. Weight loss and healthy eating, giving up smoking, and regular exercise will help maintain positive results.

If one of the main arteries supplying blood flow to the heart is affected, the heart muscle is weak, or there are many small vessels affected, the doctor may recommend heart bypass surgery. The decision depends on the extent and details of the heart disease and the person's overall medical condition.

Angioplasty and stents will improve blood flow to the heart and therefore, permit increased activity and enjoyment of life. There are still risks associated with the procedure. There is potential for the artery to narrow again or for clots to form within or around the stent. The artery may be damaged during the procedure or a heart attack may occur. Angioplasty, therefore, is performed by a team of specialists, in a specialized laboratory with back-up emergency services, readily available.

Happy Valentine's Day!