

**IT STARTED WITH A SORE,
UNEASY PAIN IN MY CHEST, LIKE
INDIGESTION. BUT THEN IT
PROGRESSIVELY
TIGHTENED, MY LEFT ARM WENT NUMB
AND IT FELT AS IF MY JAW HAD SHRUNK
INTO MY FACE AND MY TEETH HAD**

dropped out. My chest felt

like it was being braced by one of those steel banding machines that wrap bundles of bricks. Except that this was getting stronger and stronger and the tightening worse and worse. It was as if something was trying to squeeze the life out of me."

Ian Campbell's heart attack at home one morning a few years ago may be remarkable in its ferocity, but its occurrence is more everyday than many men realise. The statistics are startling. Someone in the UK has a heart attack every two minutes (that's over 300,000 people a year), half of which are fatal. Heart and circulatory diseases are the UK's number one killer and coronary heart disease (CHD) kills one in three men, giving the UK one of the highest death rates from CHD in the world. In fact, there is only one aspect of Ian's story that makes it exceptional: at the time of the attack he was just 31.

Ian is in a minority, of course – it is still rare for men under 35 to suffer heart attacks – and it is true that death rates for CHD have fallen significantly in the last ten to fifteen years. Yet one disturbing fact remains: young men are at far greater risk than young women. Death rates for men under 45 are five to six times higher than for women. In 1994, the most recent year for which figures are available, 1,204 men under 45 died of CHD compared to just 264 women. Risk is also affected by region (death rates are higher in Scotland, Northern Ireland and the North of England), occupation (manual workers have 40 per cent higher death rates) and ethnicity (it is

thought men of Indian and Pakistani origin have genetically higher blood cholesterol and are particularly unsuited to a high-fat diet).

The most common explanation for young men being at greater risk than young women is that the female sex hormone oestrogen offers natural protection. Oestrogen keeps blood vessels healthy and guards against such illnesses as diabetes. Testosterone does neither of these things. In fact, some researchers think it may actually be mildly harmful to the heart and circulatory systems.

Lifestyle factors also play a role. While women between 20 and 45 are more likely to be obese and have high blood pressure, men in this age group smoke a good deal more. Heavy smoking is the number one cause of CHD in men: more than half of the heart attacks in men under 50 are caused by tobacco. Researchers at Oxford University recently concluded that smokers between the ages of 30 and 39 are over six times more likely to have a heart attack than non-smokers.

Stress may also be important. There is evidence to suggest that chronic, long-term, work-related stress is more injurious than acute stress such as bereavement, divorce and moving house. And, while researchers are careful to avoid making the assumption that busy male executives are any more stressed out than overworked housewives, much research has been carried out into the effect of personality type on incidences of CHD. Until recently, it was thought that Type A personalities – individuals who are highly competitive, ambitious, fast living, impatient and driven by a need for control and material gain – were more at risk from stress and heart disease than saps who stayed

**ONE IN THREE MEN DIE OF HEART ATTACKS AND SOME OF THEM ARE YOUNGER
THAN YOU. PHILIP WATSON DISCOVERS HOW YOUR TICKER COULD BE A TIME BOMB**



Tickety-boom: it could be you.

HEART ATTACKS

CASE STUDIES

at home. However, it is now thought that people further down the career ladder also face their own particular risks.

"A large study of Whitehall civil servants conducted recently showed that people in lower grades had higher rates of CHD than those in higher grades," says Mike Rayner of the Department of Public Health at Oxford University. "The belief is that they have less control over the stress and workload being put upon them and less of a work support system."

The risks facing young men may also be exacerbated by ignorance and lack of interest. The British Heart Foundation has vigorously targeted women with advertising campaigns that proclaim "Britain's No 1 Ladykiller Isn't A Man". The National Heart Forum has recently published a book entitled *CHD: Are Women Special?*, and everybody from Sainsbury's magazine to Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* has tried to raise awareness in women. Yet no such campaigns have been targeted at younger men. The explanations and implications of the potential risks confronting young men go unreported and unresearched.

"One of the key issues in health promotion is the rate of return on the time and money invested," says Professor Shah Ebrahim of the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine in London. "Campaigns tend to concentrate on teenagers, because that's when smoking habits start, and middle-age people, because that's when heart disease usually begins. The problem is by then it can be too late. It's among 20-35 year olds that poor lifestyle habits begin."

This may help to explain why the risks facing younger men may be on the increase. While the percentage of male smokers in the UK has fallen dramatically over the last 25 years, the rate of decline has stopped and may even have been reversed in men in their twenties. It is certainly on the increase among teenage boys. And although it is now recognised that a small amount of alcohol can be good for you, younger men are twice as likely as women to drink more than the recommended weekly maximum (21 units for men, 14 for women). There is also evidence to suggest that both young men and women are drinking more.

Research even suggests single men are more at risk from illness and heart diseases than married men, because the social support of a wife exerts a protective influence on some men.

"The general lad's lifestyle of 40 fags a day, eating McDonald's, lying on the sofa watching footie rather than playing footie and talking about sex rather than having sex, of getting stressed out and dealing with it through drinking is certainly going to cause trouble – these are the heart attack victims of the future," concludes Professor Ebrahim. "The message is: if you smoke, stop; if you're drinking heavily, cut back; if you're approaching 40 and haven't had your blood pressure checked for three or four years, get it checked; and if you're overweight and haven't seen your penis in ages, lose that gut."

For advice and further information contact the British Heart Foundation, 14 Fitzhardinge Street, London W1H 4DH (tel: 0171-935 0185).

● **ROB FOWLER was 35 and working as a professional musician in London when he had his heart attack.**

"I remember having had a very large lunch and an uncomfortable evening before going to bed. I kept thinking I wasn't quite right – it felt like indigestion – but it became more and more painful throughout the night. The pain climbed up to my throat, grabbing it tight, and then reached across to my shoulders.

In the early hours of the morning I felt I needed to go to the bathroom and it was then that the nausea came on. I was dripping with sweat and I tried to be sick, but I actually passed out with my hands around the loo. It was a real white-knuckle thing.

I experienced some strange out-of-body stuff, saw a bright light, and then luckily I came to. It was only when I looked in the mirror that I realised something pretty bloody awful had happened. I looked so grey that I hardly recognised myself. I don't know how long I had been unconscious, but I crawled round to my flatmate's bedroom, fell on his bed and woke him up. I was still in enormous pain. It frightened the life out of him.

Dave got me back into bed, held my hand and calmed me down. I was very panicky. I knew it was serious but I thought no, it can't be a heart attack – that happens to others, much older than me. It wasn't

until I saw the serious faces in intensive care that it really dawned on me.

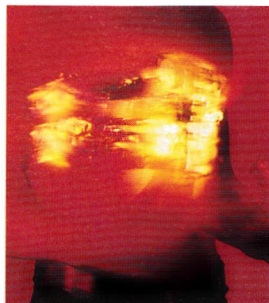
The doctors said afterwards that I was as close as it's possible to get without dying. I'd been leading a very poor life; in fact, doing everything wrong that one can do wrong. I smoked 40 a day and had smoked since I was a teenager. I had been taking cocaine daily for two or three months before the attack. I smoked a little dope. I was unfit and I had a poor diet. I was also very stressed because Dave and I were working full-time recording our first album and I had written most of the material. I was sleeping very irregular hours and drinking lots of strong black coffee. There was a history of heart disease in my family, too, on my mother's side – an uncle who died on the golf course and my grandfather in his early fifties.

After I left hospital I hardly dared go down the road – I found it so scary. It took me about eight months, gradually walking more and more each day, before I felt anything like normal

again. I just marvelled at the fact that I was still alive, and I marvelled at everything around me. It was extraordinary; I felt like a child again because I was scared and vulnerable and I didn't trust myself.

I made a conscious decision that I wouldn't vegetate. I got back to playing and writing songs and found great comfort in that, but I felt music wasn't what I should be doing. I couldn't play live, and haven't since, and so I gave up my life as a musician. I helped to run a windsurfing school in Norfolk. I learned to drive and started teaching part-time. I completely changed my lifestyle. I watched my diet, exercised and got plenty of fresh air. I almost gave up smoking; I had just one or two a day. And I calmed down. I became highly domesticated and stopped worrying about making money.

It also changed my life with my girlfriend. I started to think about marriage and children, and later we got married. I re-evaluated my



RISK CHECKLIST

THREE TICKS AND IT'S TIME FOR CHANGE

- ☐ MAN
- ☐ SMOKER
- ☐ REGULARLY DEVOUR "GUTBUSTERS" (FISH AND CHIPS, BURGERS, BACON ROLLS ETC)
- ☐ HEAVY DRINKER
- ☐ OVER 45
- ☐ FAMILY HISTORY OF HEART DISEASE
- ☐ SLOTHFUL (TAKE LESS THAN TWENTY MINUTES AEROBIC EXERCISE THREE TIMES A WEEK)
- ☐ CAN'T REMEMBER THE LAST TIME YOU HAD YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE CHECKED
- ☐ CAN'T REMEMBER THE LAST TIME YOU ATE FRESH FRUIT OR A SALAD
- ☐ OVERWEIGHT
- ☐ LIKE CRISPS AND LOTS OF SALT WITH YOUR FOOD
- ☐ OFTEN FEEL STRESSED OUT
- ☐ HAVE EXPERIENCED GIDDINESS, BREATHLESSNESS OR PAINS IN THE CHEST AFTER MEALS OR EXERCISE IN THE LAST YEAR
- ☐ HAVE HIGH BLOOD CHOLESTEROL LEVELS



IAN CAMPBELL, AGE 31



RUSSELL MAHONEY, AGE 32



ROB FOWLER, AGE 35

life in every respect. Even sex seemed to get better. You go slow at first – you're advised to – but I felt more committed and involved and happier being with her because before I'd been so married to the music and trying to reach success.

I realised how lucky I had been. If Dave hadn't been there I don't know whether I could have made a phone call and I could have slipped back into unconsciousness. I've often thought about that. I came very, very close."

● **IAN CAMPBELL was 31 and a firefighter in Milton Keynes.**

"I was on night duty and there had been a normal house fire, nothing spectacular, but when I came out afterwards I felt strange. Back at the station I could feel pains strapping around my chest; it was sore but not that severe, so I thought it was indigestion. The attack happened back at home in the morning. I was banging on the bedroom floor, but my wife's deaf. It was only when I recovered enough to go downstairs that she realised what was going on.

There were no advanced signs nor warnings. I was a smoker, but only ten a day. My diet was reasonable, as were my blood pressure and cholesterol levels. I didn't drink to any degree. And I was very fit. I'd spent six years in the army before joining the fire brigade and I was doing a lot of anaerobic weight training, running and general fitness training. I suffered no real stress on the job, but perhaps I did worry a lot about things, such as money and having a young family.

It was worse when I came out of hospital; I cried then because I thought, why me? I felt I'd lost everything. The brigade wrote me off as being unfit; once you've had a heart attack you're considered 'crippled' and pensioned off. In hospital, one senior officer said to my parents, 'Well, that's the end of your son's career.' But that only helped me; I was determined to prove that I could get my job back.

Within three months I was doing ten-mile runs and going through a mad, stupid period physically and mentally. I just went wild. I used to go out for 100-mile bike rides, leaving at six in the morning and coming back at eight at night. I was trying to prove to myself and others that I could get fit and work again. Perhaps it was the drugs: the beta-blockers really screwed me up.

Having a heart attack changes everything. It makes you think, well, I might not be here this time next week, so why not go out and enjoy yourself? I felt like I was a teenager again. I had a bad patch and wandered a little outside my marriage, but my wife knows about it now and we got through it.

I couldn't check if there was a history of heart disease in my family because I'm adopted, but after the attack I felt I wanted to trace my parents. It had never bothered me before – I had a mum and dad who I loved – but I thought sod it, I'm going to find out what happened. I discovered that my father had died of a massive heart attack in his fifties, but I tracked down my birth mother and we now see each other and talk regularly on the phone.

Having a heart attack has changed my life: it's made it better. I've stopped smoking, cut out foods that are high in fat, and I enjoy exercise a lot more because I do aerobics classes now, which are a good laugh. I enjoy life more; I don't worry about things so much.

Eventually, I went through the medical appeal system and won; after almost a year I was back on duty. I am the first firefighter to return to active duty following a heart attack. They call me 'Genghis' now at the station because I just don't give in."

● **RUSSELL MAHONEY was 32 and the manager of a travel agency in Bristol.**

"It was a very hot August night, I'd had a large meal and someone phoned me to play a game of football because they were one short. At the end of game I couldn't catch my breath; I was feeling very heavy and when I got home I just didn't know what was wrong. I thought it was the effects of the meal, but as I lay on the settee my wife said I got greyer and greyer. Then a pain shot right down my arm; it was like an electric shock or being poked with a cattle prod.

My wife was eight-and-a-half months pregnant with our first child, so when we arrived at the hospital everyone went straight to her, thinking that she was in labour. By that time the pain was getting worse and when I got into intensive care it was tightening and tightening, as if somebody very heavy was sitting on my chest. I really felt I was going to die, and I began to think of my wife and the child I would never see. Then I was given a tablet that knocked me out.

The doctors thought that it was a viral infection at first. I'd never smoked, I didn't drink a lot and I was quite healthy – I played football and trained a couple of nights a week. I didn't fit the statistics for having a heart attack and there was no history of heart disease in my family. In the intensive care unit everyone was 30 or 40 years older than me; I felt like a fraud.

After I was discharged I went back to hospital every week for tests, but it took the doctors a month or two to determine that I had actually had a heart attack. It turned out to be genetic rather than anything related to lifestyle.

One of the major arteries in my heart had slipped between two muscles so when I put pressure on it – playing football in great heat after a heavy meal, for example – it pinched the blood vessel and cut off the blood supply to the heart. I was very depressed afterwards because I'm very active and thought I wouldn't be able to do things again. But I was playing football after a couple of months.

The most difficult part for me was people's reactions to the attack. I felt they were wrapping me in cotton wool. It was nice that so many people cared, but they were all saying, don't do that, you can't do that, be careful. I've come to terms with it now and I know how to cope with it, but some people still treat you as if you're a china doll.

People looked at me very differently as an employee, too. When we moved up to Glasgow I went for job interviews and felt I was damaged goods or disabled. I was a massive risk; employers seemed to think I might drop dead on the premises.

Still, I feel that I've been given a second chance. Coinciding with the birth of my daughter, the attack certainly made me appreciate life more. I used to be out every night with the lads; I only have the odd night out now. It's made me calm down – I used to do everything at 100 miles an hour – and it's made me think life's great, just enjoy it and don't get wound up. Now, I take things as they come." ■