

Power Pedaling

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I have first hand experience concerning how bicycling can help build new arteries in the heart. I'd like to share this with you because perhaps it will help also to affect your quality of life. But before the good news, I need to share with you how I have been circulatory challenged.

More than 20 years ago I had an angioplasty to help clear arteries in my heart, 10 plus years ago I had bypass surgery, and last summer I had 3 stents installed in my heart arteries. Fortunately, these were all proactive procedures – exercise-induce-angina has always warned me its time for an overhaul before a heart attach occurred.

As part of last year's stent procedure an angiogram was taken to determine where the narrow arteries were. A fringe benefit this was that I learned I have substantial "collateral circulation" – heart arteries have developed to compensate for the arteries that were clogging. To understand how the heart can be encouraged to grow more arteries, consider what happens to a long distance runner. That heart muscle does considerably more work than is performed by an "average" heart and thus has to be supplied with more oxygen. Evolution (if you believe in such stuff) has decided that the way to do this is by growing more arteries.

My weight is optimal, my cholesterol is 160, the HDL (good stuff) much above average, and I'm in good physical shape. In spite of this, the necessity of recently having a stent procedure indicates that my artery clogging tendencies are considerably above average. So I asked myself (and also my cardiologist) what else I could do. Fortunately, the cardiologist said I can do all the exercise I want. Stress tests have indicated that extreme exercise should not cause a heart attack, but perhaps result in angina and that would prompt me to back off a little.

So this summer I added a new facet to my biking. Every two to three days I specifically ride to "grow arteries". Since we live in the White Mountains, I have lots hill available to challenge my stamina. Hills that I used to climb in the lowest gear I now climb in the middle of the gear range which requires pedaling standing up. Once my pulse rate has thus been significantly raised I pedal at a more leisurely pace until another hill appears and I rise to the challenge again. Periodically raising your pulse via strenuous exercise and than backing off a little is called *interval training* and is a recognized way to increase your physical stamina.

I was very pleasantly surprised to discover how soon I had positive results from *interval training*. Within 6 weeks time I was able to feel significant improvement in my stamina. Now I no longer look upon hill climbing with my bicycle as cruel and unusual treatment, but as an opportunity to grow arteries. Of course, don't undertake strenuous exercise without consulting with your doctor.