

Vaccination Can Prevent Heart Attacks Caused by COVID-19

For many of us, the reality of a half-million deaths from COVID-19 is enough to persuade us to get the COVID-19 vaccine when it is available. In fact, the pandemic may soon claim as many lives as cardiovascular disease does each year. Unfortunately, COVID-19 appears to attack the cardiovascular system, causing additional deaths as well as possible long-term harm. The vaccine, which is safe and well-tested, is likely the best way to reduce the risk of harm to the heart, lungs, and blood vessels.

COVID-19 can cause severe irregular heartbeats and heart failure. It also affects the way our blood clots and can cause severe clotting disorders. COVID-19 patients have an increased likelihood to have strokes, heart attacks, blood clots in their lungs, and life-threatening clots in the veins and arteries in their legs. Healthy people, while at lower risk, still can get COVID, suffer cardiovascular damage, and even die. However, people with heart conditions and the very old are most at risk.

Because the virus is new, we still do not know all the ways it harms the body. We do know several direct effects it can have. It can attack and damage the heart muscle, which is called myocarditis. It can injure the heart by starving it of oxygen. It inflames blood vessels, and it raises the cardiac enzymes that we use to monitor damage to the heart and other tissue.

Some patients have no symptoms at all. Others go into cardiogenic shock, an emergency in which the heart cannot pump enough blood. Even with an understanding of the conditions which may increase the risk of severe complications, we cannot always predict which patients will have no symptoms and which will have severe problems.

As a cardiologist, I know that vaccination is the best strategy for preventing or reducing the catastrophic effects of COVID-19 on patients and ultimately their families. I have gotten the vaccine myself, and it appears to be safe even for patients on blood thinners.

I and my colleagues at the Rutland Heart Center strongly support widespread COVID vaccination in our community. We have seen the damage that COVID can do and believe that the vaccine is a much better alternative than catching COVID and taking your chances.

This week's Health Talk was written by Stanley M. Shapiro, MD, FACC, FASNC, Medical Director, Rutland Heart Center, a clinic of Rutland Regional Medical Center.