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Lessons from my father's death due to high cholesterol



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Vik Bhandari, alongside his wife Bhavisha, established the [Men's Health Awareness Ball](#)⁷ in 2016 after the premature deaths of some of their closest male family members. Vik's own father suffered a stroke, then a deadly heart attack, with high cholesterol a major factor. The fact his dad's death was preventable inspired Vik to change his own behaviour, and look to help others do similarly when it comes to their health.

I moved from the UK to Australia, via a two-year stay in Barbados, in 2003, aged 35. Whenever you make such a big move like that, you've always got a bit of fear in the back of your mind that you may

someday get that dreaded call to say “one of your parents has died” or “something’s happened”. That’s the way I felt with mum and dad being on the other side of the world.

Back then, my mother was the one who was actually sick. She had recently been diagnosed with Parkinson’s Disease and osteoporosis. So we always felt it was our mum who was the one who was going to have an issue, not my father. But one day, in the middle of the night, we got a phone call saying dad had collapsed — he woke up in bed and didn’t feel right. He tried to get out of bed and just collapsed on the floor and couldn’t move. He’d suffered a stroke.

We found out later his cholesterol was really, really high — when there is too much cholesterol in the blood, plaque can build up on artery walls and narrow the arteries. We found out later this is called ‘atherosclerosis’. His arteries were blocked and not only blocked, but part of the plaque chipped off and ended up going to his brain, so he ended up in hospital. Dad was a fit person, did yoga every day, was not overweight, did everything for my mum, was very active in the community and was very active all-round. To find out he’d had a stroke and was paralysed on his left side was such a shock.

After it happened, I flew to the UK. I felt completely helpless until I got there but then when I was there, I was completely helpless again because there was nothing I could do. Dad managed to get his speech back and initially, things improved — he started to recover, and he was determined to get back to his old self. He was very proud of being independent but unfortunately, I think he pushed himself too fast and then slipped and broke his hip. After that, he was like, “oh, this is too hard for me”. And he just accepted he was paralysed and that was it. In the blink of an eye, he’d basically gone from a healthy older male to someone who was disabled. It was excruciating to witness.

Then, 11 years after the stroke in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, I got another phone call and I was told that dad had passed away — he had a heart attack. Notwithstanding border closures and a 14-day hotel quarantine, Bhavisha and I did make it to the UK for his funeral. Of course, any death of a close relative hurts immensely but to then find out it was preventable, it hurts even more — he could’ve been so much more proactive about his health, like a lot of us blokes struggle to do, too.

A bit of time went by, and I kept on thinking to myself ‘how did this happen — how did his cholesterol get so high, and why wasn’t it checked?’. I was wondering why many people (males especially) didn’t go to their doctors to monitor these things despite the fact it can

save lives! Eventually, I talked to my wife about it —how we'd suffered deaths in the family that could've been prevented, and why so many blokes don't develop a relationship with a doctor to stay on top of things.

It inspired us to start up the [Men's Health Awareness Ball](#)⁷ after we asked each other 'how are we going to get this message out to everyone else? It's not that hard to look after yourself'. And that's when we came up with the concept of the ball — let's try to make a positive change in men's health and do it 'one ball at a time,' as our motto now is. We just wanted to get a number of people in a room and have them speak about health issues, with six priorities for men:

Priorities

- **Get a regular/annual health check-up**
- **Know and understand their key numbers (blood pressure, cholesterol etc)**
- **Familiarise themselves with their family's medical history**
- **Build a rapport with their GP**
- **Take prompt action for any health and other concerns**
- **Be aware of the health risks associated with their age group**
- **Live a longer, healthier and happier life with their loved ones.**

Before all this started, I was just as bad as most men when it came to my health — if I felt really sick, I'd go to the nearest clinic (not a regular doctor) on my way to or from work. Really, I wasn't really looking after my health that well, and often something would pop up, such as a meeting or work deadline, which took precedence and I'd just soldier on without seeing the doctor. Speaking with numerous health professionals since, they have all reinforced a message of 'you need to know what your blood pressure and cholesterol levels are,

among other conditions. You need your baseline numbers because without a baseline, you can't really monitor these things and you might end up in hospital, or worse'— like my dad, unfortunately.

Family history should also be a warning sign — my dad's father had passed away from a heart attack too, and his brother had similar problems. When you start understanding your family health history, you start to build a more rounded picture for health professionals to use to help you. I remember going to see a doctor at one point, who referred me to a cardiologist 🧐 to make sure everything was okay with my heart. Even though my heart was in great shape, they still put me on a preventative measure (statins), due to my family history.

Since then, I've taken statins every day, had regular testing for things like cholesterol and blood pressure, and then there's obviously lifestyle changes as well, which are also important. No one wants to hear that you should be losing weight and drinking less and doing some regular fitness training, but all these pieces of the puzzle are important when it comes to your health.

“The whole thing is so simple — it's not that hard, men!”

– Vik Bhandari

We're not asking you to change the world. Just get checked out, keep checking your numbers and make some small changes if the doctor recommends anything. It can legitimately save your life. I'm not saying you should stop having a pizza and a few beers on a Friday night with your mates, just try to do the basics well most of the time, and build a relationship with your doctor.

My wife and I started the ball because we kept wondering 'what could have been done differently if my dad's condition was known? Would it have made a difference to my father's life and to my life?' Well, it is too late for my father, but hopefully the changes I've made personally, as well as the impact the ball has made with those who have attended, is making a difference.



Healthy Male was a proud charity partner for the 2023 Men's Health Awareness Ball, where passionate and generous individuals and organisations came together to support all things men's health.

You can learn more about the annual Men's Health Awareness Ball [here](#) [↗].

Keywords

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