

## The Unexpected Death of James Gandolfini – published 23 June 2013

The details of the sudden and unexpected death of James Gandolfini are not available at the time of this writing, but such tragic events occur daily to many similarly young and ostensibly healthy individuals. But the notoriety of famous victims draws us in to the event as if it were a personal loss, and not just one for their family, friends and actual acquaintances. Since the Gandolfini circumstances are unknown to me, I thought a general overview of this premature death and its implications for the public may be of value.

Sudden death is often cardiac in origin and unfortunately quite common, contributing to cardiovascular disease being the number one cause of death in the developed world. As many as 40% of the individuals have no warning whatsoever of the jeopardy they face, and the remainder may have nonspecific symptoms that they may dismiss. The classic chest discomfort with arm involvement is much less common, and in women, may not be present at all.

The classic risk factors include a family history of premature cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, abnormal blood fats, and tobacco use. These have been well recognized for many decades, and effective lifestyle change and medical interventions have been demonstrated to be able to mitigate the risks considerably. Novel risk factors have been under investigation for many years as well, and commensurately novel interventions are being developed to hopefully and positively alter their risks as well. It has been my privilege to work on many of these therapies over the years and bring the successful ones to our colleagues to benefit our patients at risk.

But the question at hand is what is the value of these therapies if one is not even aware that they have the condition that needs attention? Assessment of risk is a calculus of cost and benefit. If you have one of the classic risk factors noted previously, it may be wise to at least sort out what one's risk status actually may be. The Affordable Care Act actually places an emphasis on prevention and covers the cost of an evaluation for patients newly eligible for Medicare, obviously a higher risk population.

Talking to your doctor about cardiovascular risk assessment may lead to your doctor doing a relevant history, physical examination including blood pressure, calculation of body mass index, obtaining some general and perhaps targeted blood tests, and getting an electrocardiogram. Whether more detailed cardiovascular tests such as an echocardiogram or stress test are indicated will depend on the results of your doctor's evaluation and the discussion you will have when you review the results.

The real message here is that we all need to take ownership of our own health. That means that watching one's diet, maintaining a healthful weight, participating in appropriate and regular exercise, and getting enough rest and sleep are important. Okay, when pig's fly...I admit I don't do all of these things, too. But when someone young and famous like Mr. Gandolfini suffers a premature and unexpected event, it makes many of us take stock of where we are and what we may be able to do to evaluate and reduce our own risks. Start by having a conversation with your doctor.

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