

A Healthy Retirement?

Part I—"The Cookout"

by
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Late afternoon on a Monday in June

"The backyard is ready for tonight's cookout," Jim announced as he entered the kitchen and dropped into a chair. "The tables and chairs are set up, the grill is clean, and the drinks are on ice. Sure glad I cut the grass yesterday. I don't think I would have had time to do that today too. What are you doing? Do you need any help?"

"No, thanks," said his wife Nancy. "I'm almost done with these snacks. Why don't you fix us a drink so we can sit and relax a little before the neighbors arrive. Getting ready for these parties used to be a breeze, but right now I'm pooped. Can't understand why I feel so tired all the time."

"OK, Hon. Put your feet up for a bit. I'll be the waiter." He gave her shoulders a good rub and then headed to the refrigerator, returning shortly with two cool drinks.

As they sat on the porch swing and sipped their drinks, Jim and Nancy went over the list of things they had done and the things they had yet to do before their cruise to Alaska. Planning had been intense. It was the middle of June and the Towers had been working hard to get their garden beds planted and odd jobs finished around the house before they left on their two-week vacation.

Jim retired last year after 40 years in sales. He had suffered a massive heart attack a few years earlier and now takes medication to control his blood pressure as well as an aspirin every night. He is 68 years old, overweight, and keeps promising to quit smoking.

Nancy is 62 years old and just retired from teaching mathematics at the college level. She's still trying to find a place at home for the books and papers she decided to keep. Although she swims a few laps and lifts weights several times a week at the local Health and Wellness Center, Nancy weighs more than she should. She has been taking hormone (estrogen) replacement therapy since she had a hysterectomy at age 45. Now she's concerned about developing osteoporosis because her sister was recently diagnosed with it, and their mother died in early April from complications following a broken hip.

Later that evening

The neighborhood cookout was a success.

"I'm stuffed," sighed Nancy as she finished her last bite of pie. "Let's just sit and talk some more before we start cleaning up. I don't know if I can move! I've had a pain in my back all week, and now I have a burning sensation in the lower part of my chest. If I didn't know better, I'd say that something happened to me last month when I retired. I suddenly seem to be falling apart!"

"You probably just ate too much. Why don't you take some antacid?" suggested her friend Harry. "It helps my indigestion every time."

Others agreed with Harry's suggestion, and Nancy left to search the medicine cabinet. The pain in her chest eventually lessened, and Nancy enjoyed the rest of the evening with Jim and their friends.

The next day, Tuesday

After cleaning up the remains of their cookout Jim and Nancy began their final packing in earnest. A few neighbors stopped by to confirm house-sitting duties and to see if they could help with any last minute details.

"Jim and I are really looking forward to getting away. It's been years since we splurged on a vacation. But, getting ready to go is so much work! We thought we'd never get the garden ready in time. Sometimes I think it would be better just to stay home," said Nancy.

"I know what you mean," said their next door neighbor Jill. "But I'm sure you'll love the cruise and Alaska. Don't worry, everything back here will be fine."

In the midst of the day's hubbub, Nancy's test results from an early morning screening at the local Health and Wellness Center arrived in the afternoon mail. She glanced at them briefly and stuck the paper into a book she was taking along on vacation. "Maybe later I can figure out what all of this means," she said to herself.

Nancy's test results (at rest and fasting levels):

TEST	NANCY'S RESULT	NORMAL RANGE
Heart rate	88 beats/min	60-100 beats/min
Blood pressure	138/85 mm Hg	90/60 - 140/90 mm Hg
Total cholesterol	238 mg/dL	<200 mg/dL
HDL	46 mg/dL	45-60 mg/dL
LDL	161 mg/dL	<100 mg/dL
Triglycerides	220 mg/dL	<150 mg/dL
Glucose	128 mg/dL	80-100 mg/dL

Questions:

1. Assess the health of Jim and Nancy by listing the healthy and not-so-healthy things we know about each of them. Fill out a table similar to the one below to list your observations about their health status.

JIM		NANCY	
HEALTHY	NOT-SO-HEALTHY	HEALTHY	NOT-SO-HEALTHY

2. What diseases are Jim and Nancy at risk for and why?

3. What other information might be helpful to know in assessing their health? How would this information help?

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Part II—"The Cruise"

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Jim and Nancy flew to Vancouver to start their cruise. The ship was like a city with thousands of people, lots of activities, and an abundance of delicious food and drink. The Towers enjoyed being wined and dined and kept busy day and night. They rarely missed the afternoon ice cream parties on deck.

Feeling a little guilty about eating so much food, the Towers joined other travelers for early morning and mid-afternoon power walks on deck. They planned to increase their speed and distance a little each day. Their goal was to walk a mile in 18 minutes by the end of the 10-day cruise.

The weather was clear and the scenery was breath-taking as they walked and talked. Early one morning, after about 15 minutes of power walking on deck, Nancy started feeling nauseous and had trouble breathing. "Jim, I think something is wrong with me," she said.

"Let's stop and rest for a few minutes. Maybe that will help," he said. Jim helped her to a deck chair and fussed with a blanket to protect her from the cool morning air. Nancy's nausea decreased and her breathing improved. They sat on deck chairs for the next hour watching the whales swimming beside the ship.

The next morning during their power walking Nancy experienced a similar problem. "Jim, now I'm sure that something is wrong. For weeks I've been feeling tired and have had a nagging backache. But this nausea and shortness of breath are new. I'm scared. Do you think I could be having a heart attack?" she said.

"Nah, I doubt it. I mean, you don't have chest pains or anything like that, do you? Don't you remember how I thought one of those whales was sitting on my chest and wouldn't get up when I had mine?" said Jim.

"You're probably right. I don't have chest pains," she said. "Maybe it's just all the recent changes in my life and eating too much of this rich food."

Later that day Jim and Nancy joined a small group from the ship for a land excursion. They snapped pictures of each other standing in front of totem poles and the picture-perfect scenery and joked about the possibility of getting a salmonburger at the fast food places back home. As the afternoon ended, a blast from the ship's horn warned them that it was time to head back to the ship.

As the group trotted down to the docks, Nancy pulled aside and Jim stayed to keep her company. Carol, a member of their group, slowed her pace, then went back to Nancy and Jim. "You two OK?" she asked.

"Yeah, I think so," replied Jim. "Nancy's been feeling pooped lately and has complained about a backache. Now she's having trouble keeping up with the group."

"What kind of pooped, Nancy?" asked Carol.

"Well, I think all the preparations for the trip wore me out," explained Nancy. "I expected to be energized by the vacation. But both yesterday and this morning as we were walking on deck, I started to feel nauseous and had trouble breathing. It scared me at first, but then it went away after I rested. Now, again, I'm having trouble walking fast."

"I don't mean to scare you, Nancy, but I think this could be serious," warned Carol.

"You do?" questioned Nancy. "You look so young. Have you had these problems too?"

"No, not me," Carol replied. "But some of my patients have. You see, I'm on this cruise for a small break between finishing a residency in family practice and joining a group practice in my hometown. I think you may be experiencing angina equivalent symptoms."

"What does that mean?" asked Jim.

"Women often have symptoms of coronary heart disease, and even of a heart attack, that are different from men's," explained Carol. "Nancy's back pain, fatigue, nausea, and shortness of breath are typical for women. Because the symptoms are different from typical male symptoms they are called 'angina equivalent symptoms.' For now, Nancy, your symptoms go away when you rest. But if they don't go away with rest, it's a good indication that you're actually having a heart attack. I think you should see a doctor who specializes in cardiology or internal medicine soon."

Questions:

1. How are angina equivalent symptoms different from classic angina symptoms?
2. What causes these symptoms?
3. Why do the symptoms lessen when Nancy rests?
4. Before reading this case study did you know that males and females often have different symptoms for coronary heart disease or a heart attack? If so, how did you find out?
5. How do medical researchers find out if individuals of both sexes and from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds have similar symptoms or react the same to treatment?

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