

Heart disease

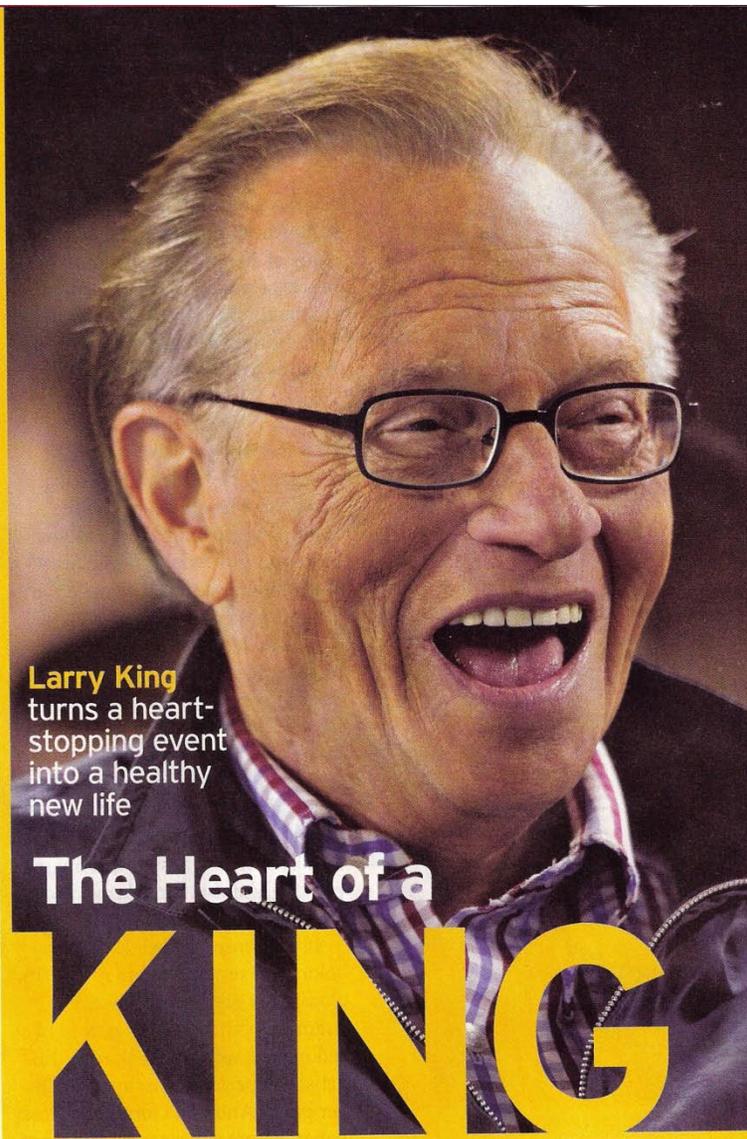
“I did everything wrong.” Ask television, radio, movie personality, author, and host of CNN’s “Larry King Live” to assess his life, and he’ll freely admit to making mistakes. But he’s not talking about on-air faux pas or missed interview opportunities. He’s talking about how he treated his heart. Doing what he says are the “three worst things that you can do,” King, like many Americans, spent most of his life taking his cardiac health for granted.

King-sized mistakes

“I smoked. That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever done,” says King, who began radio broadcasting in 1957. Picking up the habit at age 17, the talk-show host says he smoked regularly for the better part of 36 years—and was known for smoking on air in the early part of his TV broadcast days. Smoking, he says, was closely tied to early childhood memories. “My father, who died of a heart attack when I was 9 and a half, was a smoker,” he states. “Smoking was everywhere; athletes smoked, it wasn’t discouraged.”

Although it’s hard to imagine King being intimidated, one 30-second commercial used to do just that—the late actor Yul Brynner, suffering from lung cancer, taped it two decades ago—and King saw it. “In the commercial, Brynner said, ‘This is Yul Brynner and I’m dead now. Please don’t smoke,’” he recalls. “I always changed the channel when that came on because it wasn’t going to happen to me. I wasn’t going to die. I was in denial.”

King was also oblivious as to how his diet was slowly turning him into a ticking time bomb. “I never cared about what I ate. I ate what I enjoyed no matter what the consequences,” he says crediting his Jewish/Eastern European upbringing for significantly influencing his tastes. “As a kid, I grew up eating grease and a lot of foods that mothers made, at the time not knowing they were cooking their



Larry King turns a heart-stopping event into a healthy new life

The Heart of a

KING

kids potential heart attacks.”

Not getting any physical activity was another King-sized mistake. “I was just never really interested in exercise,” he says. That lack of interest rounded out his trifecta of unhealthy heart habits and resulted in a resounding wake-up call at age 53: a heart attack.

Reality checks in

The heart attack was King’s big reality check. “It blew my mind,” he says. “I never thought that would happen to me.” But his was a “lucky heart attack. I had only 4% damage to my heart,” he explains, “which

made it easier to be strong enough to have quintuple bypass surgery.”

His “new life” had begun. “I quit smoking the day of the heart attack,” King says. “It was Feb. 24, 1987, and I never smoked again.” A friend who worked in the mental health field told the former three-pack-a-day smoker that the thing that had most likely helped him quit cold turkey was a heart attack-related mental trigger. “Every time I smoked,” explains King, “I’d see the emergency room and relive the heart attack.”

Genes were another factor in the “wake-up” heart attack. But since King couldn’t change them, he set

out to override them. In addition to quitting smoking, he developed new habits. Greasy, high-cholesterol foods synonymous with heart disease were swapped for low-fat foods. Instead of super-sized portions, he scaled way back. "I don't eat as much now," he notes. "I'm very aware of everything I put on my plate."

Exercise is no longer a stranger to the "walking freak" that King admits he's become. "Walking daily on a treadmill helps keep my heart healthy and helps me watch my weight," he says. At a trim 150 pounds, walking vigilantly factors heavily into the fact that the 75-year-old has outlived his father by more than three decades—and counting.

Overcoming a fear of doctors

Now well into his 51st year in broadcasting, King did a lot over the years to improve his health. But he also credits his team of cardiologists,

without whom, he says, he wouldn't be alive. Today, in fact, he maintains a working relationship with his doctor, but that wasn't always the case.

"I was afraid to go to the doctor—for a lot of years," says the man who could hobnob with celebrities and ask the tough questions of politicians, heads of state, and even criminals. "That," he adds, "was idiotic."

Today, King says he never leaves home without his cardiologist. And because he lives in Los Angeles, but also spends a lot of time in Washington, D.C., and New York City, he has doctors in each of the cities. And he is vigilant about listening and communicating with his doctors.

But he's not the only one. King's book, *Taking on Heart Disease*, published in 2004, is a testament to the value of a good doctor-patient relationship, as well as a guide for those struggling with heart disease.

In it, the author and celebrities with heart disease—including Peggy Fleming, Mike Wallace, and Tommy LaSorda—talk about the importance of communicating openly and effectively with their doctors.

That kind of open communication also applies to King's entire family. The give and take among family members—wife, kids, and grandkids—plays a strong role in his continuing cardiac care. No one harps on him to take care of himself, though. Says 46-year-old Larry King Jr., "He's the one always reminding us about eating healthy and scheduling our physicals."

So how's life 20-plus years after heart disease took center stage? "I'm doing very well," King reflects. "My cholesterol is low; I pass my stress test." That, he believes, is what everyone with cardiovascular disease can do. **■**

—Gina Roberts-Grey

Striving to Save **One Heart a Day**

Larry King's got a lot of heart. Since 1988, when he first established the Larry King Cardiac Foundation (LKCF), he's helped 600 people get cardiac care—including bypass surgery, pacemaker placements, and screenings—when they couldn't afford to get it on their own.

Of course, he's had the help of his wife, Shawn Southwick-King, the foundation chairperson, and his son, Larry King Jr., its 46-year-old president. In partnership with top cardiologists (including his own doctors) and cardiac care facilities around the country, Larry Sr. has been able to demonstrate just how serious he is about battling heart disease—and not just his own.

For starters, cardiac screenings are an excellent first line of defense against cardiovascular illness, according to Larry Jr. "We will screen more than 3,000 people this year for heart disease at one of our partner screening

events," he says. But at these events, LKCF and its partners provide not only screenings, but also counseling and, if necessary, will get those with pressing cardiac issues admitted to a hospital and helped—at no cost to the patients.

Cardiac patients helped by LKCF and its partners also get another happy surprise: a phone call from fellow heart disease patient, Larry Sr. himself!

In 2007, according to his son, Larry Sr., got to make 200 calls to people who'd been given a hand with their health through cardiac procedures afforded by LKCF and its partners. The goal for 2008? "We want to save one heart a day," Larry Jr. states. "And have 365 calls made by my dad this year!"

To get a screening or more information about the Larry King Cardiac Foundation, visit LKCF.org.



Larry King Jr. (l.), president of LKCF, and dad, Larry King Sr.