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New UT Southwestern website increases Heart IQ

DALLAS – Feb. 13, 2012 – Most people concerned about heart disease know to avoid the usual health hazards – obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and smoking – but an interactive cardiology research-based website launched by UT Southwestern Medical Center may lead to new thinking about lifetime risk factors.

The consumer-friendly Heart IQ website <http://www.utsouthwestern.org/heartiq> is based on the latest research from UT Southwestern cardiologists and focuses on three main factors: family, food and fitness. Knowing your family tree, for instance, can help identify whether you have an increased genetic risk for developing cardiovascular disease or related conditions. Heart disease experienced by a first-degree relative – parents, siblings or children – puts an individual at higher risk.

Women in particular will benefit from a better understanding of their risk factors, said Dr. Amit Khera, associate professor of internal medicine who leads preventive cardiology at UT Southwestern. His recent study, published in the *American Heart Journal*, demonstrated that women with a family history of heart disease are less likely than men with such histories to change unhealthy habits like smoking and not exercising.

“Although cardiovascular disease is less prevalent among young women, the consequences can be more severe,” Dr. Khera said. “Women are twice as likely as men to have fatal heart attacks.”

Experts also say eating the right kinds of food will have an impact on the progression and treatment of heart disease. The Heart IQ site includes a heart-healthy “diet cheat sheet” that lists foods low in saturated fat and high in omega-3 fats.

The website also emphasizes that one’s body mass index alone might not give a clear enough picture of heart disease risk, a finding published by UT Southwestern cardiologists in 2007. A stronger correlation for heart disease risk is an individual’s waist-to-hip ratio. The waist measurement limit at or just above your bellybutton for women is 35 inches; for men it’s 40 inches.

“Fat that accumulates around your waist secretes inflammatory proteins that contribute to

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Heart IQ website – 2

atherosclerotic plaque buildup, whereas fat around your hips doesn't appear to increase risk for cardiovascular disease at all,” said Dr. James de Lemos, professor of internal medicine and medical director of the Dallas Heart Study at UT Southwestern.

Being physically fit also lowers a person’s lifetime risk of heart disease, even when other risk factors are present. The higher a person’s fitness level in midlife, the lower the risk of cardiac death in one’s lifetime, said Dr. Jarett Berry, assistant professor of internal medicine at UT Southwestern.

The Heart IQ site includes information about Dr. Berry’s lifetime risk calculator, which is related to research published in 2011 in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*. “We’re trying to build the best crystal ball,” Dr. Berry said.

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