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Heart Disease Takes A Pounding

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(CBS) On Friday's "HeartScore," *The Early Show* takes a look at a new low-tech treatment for serious heart disease in which no surgery is required.

The Early Show Medical Correspondent Dr. Emily Senay reports it is gaining popularity among doctors and patients.

The treatment, which increases blood flow to the heart, is the number 1 procedure in China, and now doctors in the United States are finding it helps get people with debilitating heart disease symptoms get moving again.

Enhanced External Counterpulsation, EECP, is a non-invasive therapy that literally puts the squeeze on heart disease.

As the legs are squeezed, blood flow is increased as it is pumped back to the heart. The contractions are timed to the patient's heartbeat.

"We're exercising the circulation by getting more and more blood to flow through your blood vessels," says Dr. Debra Braverman. "They become more mature, they develop, and it's been shown in scientific studies to actually grow and develop more blood vessels -- restoring normal blood flow to the heart."

With a severely diseased heart, Marcia Basicke's doctor told her she had only a year to live. But, that was three years ago, and before she started EECP.

"It has kept me alive," says Basicke. "It does not hurt at all. It takes some getting used to. I mean, after all, you're not used to being wrapped up like this and pounded on, but it doesn't hurt at all."

Braverman calls EECP a passive form of exercise.

"We're exercising your circulation for you," he laughs. "Patients say, 'Finally, my dream come true. I lay on the bed and you exercise for me.'"

Although the therapy is not a cure for heart disease, improved blood flow relieves debilitating symptoms.

EECP is not a replacement for other proven therapies for heart disease. Heart patients still get the usual treatments and advice about lifestyle changes. But these more traditional ways are being used in concert with EECP.

Senay says there is no increase in risk while undergoing EECP.

"it doesn't build up pressure, in fact the FDA has approved it for a treatment during a heart attack," she says.

Medicare, but not all private insurers cover the procedure.

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