

## Heartfelt Regimen Yearlong program at Stamford Hospital uses diet, lifestyle and group therapy to reduce the risk of heart disease

By Christina Hennessy, Staff Writer

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For the past year or so, [Rick Castiglione](#) has fastidiously set aside time nearly every day to get in a session of yoga.

"She's given me back my back," the Stamford resident said of reparative stretches and moves he has learned from instructor [Rita Trieger](#). "Before this, I was looking at back surgery."

He also was on a path he knew he no longer wanted to travel. This father of four daughters, and soon-to-be grandfather, wanted to be around for his brood. He knew that meant reducing the risk factors of developing cardiovascular disease.

"I wanted to be healthy and I wanted to feel better," said Castiglione, a registered nurse who works in [Stamford Hospital's](#) finance department.

The 61-year-old said he found the tools and resources to take a healthier path -- he's lost 45 pounds -- through participation in the [Dean Ornish Program](#) for Reversing Heart Disease, which is run out of Stamford Hospital's [Center for Integrative Medicine](#) and Wellness.

The next session begins in the spring. The program, which costs \$6,500, or \$45 per session, is not covered by insurance, but hospital officials are working to get it covered through [Medicare](#), to make it more accessible to more people. It includes annual membership to the [Health and Fitness Institute](#) at the [Tully Health Center](#), which includes the cardiac rehabilitation program. For this first year, the program was offered at no cost to hospital employees who qualified.

Since the program, the only one on the East Coast, was instituted last February, 45 people (three groups of 15) have participated. Those who are eligible for the program have a history of coronary heart disease or are at high risk to develop it. All participants are screened to determine eligibility.

The yearlong program is based on the work of Dr. Dean Ornish, founder and president of the nonprofit, Sausalito, Calif.-based [Preventive Medicine Research Institute](#). For more than 30 years, Ornish, who trained in internal medicine, has worked to show, through studies and clinical trials, how behavior modifications and lifestyle changes can prevent the risk of developing heart disease, and, in some cases, actually reverse it -- without medication or surgery.

He's also instituted similar principles to other diseases, including early-stage prostate cancer.

The program has four equal components -- diet, exercise, stress management and group support. Participants follow a very low-fat, vegetarian diet; establish a steady exercise schedule; develop

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relaxation techniques; and meet with other group members to get a boost and to bolster them when the program gets tough.

Many program participants who were interviewed said it was those sessions that brought about the most transformation -- a safe place to talk about why they displayed certain behaviors and made certain choices.

"The group therapy is the most important part," in that it ties all the other components together, said retired [Marine Greg Barry](#), 52, who through the program has dropped 50 pounds, lowered his blood pressure and has lowered his blood glucose levels so that he better controls his Type II diabetes. "Everyone can diet by themselves, take yoga by themselves and exercise by themselves, but no program can be successful, life-changing, without some therapy."

"The essence of this is to understand why each of us has trouble dealing with behavior that is out of line with what we want to achieve for ourselves," said Dr. [Steven Horowitz](#), chief of cardiology at Stamford Hospital and the director of the integrative cardiology program and the Ornish program.

Horowitz first met Ornish in the early 1990s, when Horowitz was chief of cardiology at [Beth Israel](#) in New York City. Ornish invited Horowitz to California, where he was developing his lifestyle modification program.

"It was an eye-opener for me," Horowitz said, particularly of his meetings with patients. "All of them had had multiple interventions and were still sick, but they did not want to go under the knife again."

The two soon teamed up to bring a similar program to Beth Israel in the early 1990s. Horowitz said a couple of the groups still meet regularly.

Horowitz, who came to Stamford Hospital in 2003, helped to launch the Ornish program, along with an interdisciplinary team, after the integrative center's opening in 2008.

When [Paula St. Thomas](#), a follower of Ornish's work, found out there was a program near her home in Guilford, she did all that she could to enroll. She was one of the first members of the public to participate and continues to journey to Stamford weekly to meet with members of the Ornish team and the group.

"My father died of a heart attack at 64," the 57-year-old said. "I wanted to be accountable for my own life."

She said the yoga sessions were the most powerful and life-changing aspect of the program. As she carried out postures and focused on breathing, she felt a release from the pain and trauma that had accumulated over the years.

"My heart was truly healing," she said, adding that she also has lost weight.

Yet, she said it is an intense program that requires serious commitment. During the first three months when participants meet twice a week for four hours and completely immerse themselves in the dietary, physical and emotional changes, she kept a notebook to which she often refers. It keeps her on track

and it reminds her of how far she has come.

"You come out of the program with a profound sense of health and good feeling," she said. "All of the components, put together, can yield a profound transformation and sense of well-being. Every fiber of your being becomes completely enlivened."

Like St. Thomas, [Karen Stanley](#) also had heart disease in her family. While she had yet to suffer the effects, she knew the risk factors were there.

"The way I looked at it was that I had everything to gain and nothing to lose," she said.

In studies, the diet, in combination with other program components, has shown to lower blood cholesterol levels and reverse obstruction of the arteries. However critics counter that the low-fat diet (10 percent of total dietary intake, as compared to the 30 percent advised by the [American Heart Association](#)) rich in vegetables, fruits and whole grains, but nearly devoid of sugar, white-flour products or dairy could be hard to follow.

Stanley said the vegetarian diet has become second nature, as has some of the other components, such as yoga and relaxation exercises -- all practices that are new to her daily existence.

A program manager for pain and palliative care service at the hospital, she said one of the most lasting effects of the program has been effective ways to handle stress. She also has seen her blood pressure drop.

However, like many of the others, this Wilton resident said it is a commitment that does not end when the program ends. "Unless you learn to live life differently, you aren't going to get the most out of it."

Patricia Klemets, who works at the hospital's Tully Health Center, has no intention of turning back. This 60-year-old said she has never felt better. She dropped about 30 pounds, lowered her blood pressure lower and boosted her energy level.

The Stamford resident plans to use that energy to keep up with her parents, her children and her grandchildren.

"It has been amazing. Before this, I was exhausted all the time," she said.

Horowitz noted that this is just one program in the cardiac care spectrum. Results will be used to evaluate the hospital's programs, as well as to further Ornish's work.

"What we are doing is actually part of a bigger picture," Horowitz said. "We are looking to create multiple paths when it comes to treating cardiovascular risks and cardiovascular disease."

But, he said when you just offer medication or surgical procedures in the treatment of heart disease and do not talk about the lifestyle changes necessary to improving heart health, "you are missing the elephant in the room."

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By the basics

The Stamford Hospital Ornish program is a yearlong lifestyle program that works to reduce the risk of developing coronary heart disease or to improve the health of those suffering from heart disease.

The next session begins this spring and is open to those who meet the screening criteria, including being a nonsmoker for at least two months. It follows the work of best-selling author Dr. Dean Ornish, who has conducted studies on how lifestyle and behavior changes have improved heart health.

In addition to meeting criteria such as a family history of heart disease, hypertension and high cholesterol, participants must also be ready to participate in group sessions and share thoughts and feelings, said Mary Henwood-Klotz, administrator for the Center for Integrative Medicine & Wellness at Stamford Hospital.

Here are the specifics:

- Time and place -- Sessions take place at the Tully Health Center, 32 Strawberry Hill Court, Stamford. The first 12 weeks are intensive, with participants meeting twice a week for four hours.

- Program specifics -- Participants work with a team to move to a low fat (daily dietary fat intake of 10 percent), vegetarian diet; participate weekly in at least 3 hours of exercise; develop daily stress management techniques; take part in group support. Group support and stress management sessions continue once the year is done.

As part of the diet component, students learn from dietitians and chefs on how to reduce fat and incorporate ingredients such as soy-based proteins, whole grains and fruits and vegetables.

Rita Conte, 57, a nurse in the family center and maternity unit at the hospital, who participated in the program said the demonstrations helped.

"They taught us that it doesn't have to be boring," she said of the cuisine, adding that she prepares meals on the weekend to make sure she follows the plan even on harried days.

Meanwhile, Jory DeMarkey, administrative chief of diagnostic imagery at the hospital, said the diet broadened her culinary horizons. And, it has helped the 50-year-old, who has a family history of cardiovascular disease, to gain better control of her health.

"I know that everything is a choice," she said. "It is a way of life, so you know you don't have to follow a hereditary pattern."

- Cost -- The yearlong program is \$6,500 dollars, or \$45 per session (it includes an annual membership to the Health and Fitness Institute). It is not eligible for insurance reimbursement, however, hospital officials said they are working to get it covered by Medicare to make it accessible to more people.

- For more information, visit [www.stamfordhospitalintegrative.com](http://www.stamfordhospitalintegrative.com) or call 203-276-4777.

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