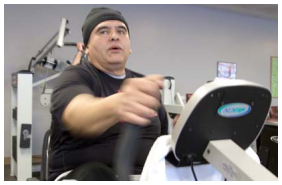
Heart healthy changes.

On an Indian summer day last October, Eppie Sisneros was working in a shallow trench.

A contractor had hit a gas line near Sixth Street and SourceGas was called to stop the leak.

Sisneros, a service technician for SourceGas, and another employee climbed in the trench and took care of the task at hand.

Clad in fire protective clothing and wearing a breathing apparatus on his back, Sisneros worked up a sweat.

After getting a clamp on the pipe, they got out of the trench and Sisneros started making phone calls to different utility companies to locate their lines in the area.

Suddenly, he felt tightness in his chest and shoulders that quickly turned to pain.

The 54-year-old decided to go home where, he said, it was impossible to get comfortable.

“I was trying to sit, lie down and nothing seemed to help,” Sisneros said. “The pain was increasing.”

When a co-worker called to check on him, Sisneros admitted he was having chest pains.

In a few minutes, the colleague had picked up his friend and taken him to Gothenburg Memorial Hospital.

Although Sisneros suspected the pain was related to his heart, the truth wasn't known until blood work revealed he was having a heart attack.

"Dr. (David) Hult told me and asked me if it was okay if we prayed," Sisneros said.

About half an hour later, the Good Samaritan AirCare helicopter had landed and whisked Sisneros to Good Samaritan Hospital.

There, cardiologists discovered that his main artery, often called the "widow maker," was 100% blocked.

Three stents were inserted.

After the procedure, Sisneros said the cardiologist told him: "You don't know how lucky you are to be here."

Sisneros spent four days at Good Samaritan and another five days recuperating at his sister's house in Grand Island.

The road to recovery has been slow.

“It was a major heart attack and there was heart damage so it will take time,” he said.

Initially, Sisneros said he found himself short of breath after walking only a few steps.

“I’d sit in a chair and concentrate on my breathing to get it back,” he said.

Five weeks in cardiac rehabilitation at GMH was a big help, Sisneros said.

“I could push myself more because I was connected to a monitor that showed an EKG and we could see what my heart was doing,” he said.

After cardiac rehabilitation, Sisneros continued with an exercise program.

Three times a week, he heads to GMH’s Wellness Center and uses exercise equipment for about 1 hours.

The 1978 Gothenburg High School graduate admits that, before the heart attack, he hadn’t worked out since high school where he played football and threw the shot and discus in track.

“Most of the time I feel good but sometimes I get shortness of breath and have to slow down,” Sisneros said.

Sisneros is also eating healthier and following a low-fat, low-salt diet.

Because he was diagnosed with sleep apnea, when breathing is disrupted, Sisneros wears a continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machine to treat the condition.

Perhaps the biggest lifestyle change is that he quit smoking.

“I tried a lot of times before and couldn’t do it,” Sisneros said.

However the hospital stay after his heart attack meant Sisneros couldn’t smoke.

And because of shortness of breath, he didn’t want to smoke.

Sisneros returned to his job at SourceGas in mid January after about three months of recuperation.

Up until Oct. 22 of last year, when the heart attack occurred, Sisneros said he thought it would never happen to him.

“I always thought it happened to other people,” he said.

Since the ordeal, Sisneros has been amazed at the number of people who have approached and told him they too have had heart attacks.

“Middle-aged people I didn’t even know had had them,” he said. “They said they’re glad I’m still around.”

Because February is Heart Disease Awareness Month, Sisneros said he hopes people decide to make changes “before something happens.”

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HEART DISEASE SCOPE & IMPACT

■ Heart disease is the number one cause of death for both men and women in the United States, claiming approximately 1 million lives annually.

■ Every 33 seconds someone in the United States dies from cardiovascular disease, which is roughly the equivalent of a September 11th-like tragedy repeating itself every 24 hours, 365 days a year.

■ More die of heart disease than of AIDS and all cancers combined.

■ By 2020, heart disease will be the leading cause of death throughout the world.

■ This year more than 920,000 Americans will have a heart attack; nearly half of them will occur without prior symptoms or warning signs.

■ 250,000 Americans die annually of sudden cardiac death – 680 every day of the year. One-half of the victims of sudden cardiac death are under the age of 65.

■ An estimated 80 million Americans have one or more types of heart disease.

■ About 8.9 million Americans have chest pain (angina) caused by reduced blood flow to the heart muscle which occurs when the coronary arteries become blocked with a build-up of plaque.

■ Currently about 7.9 million Americans are alive who have had a heart attack.

■ In 2008, the total cost of cardiovascular disease (coronary heart disease, hypertensive disease, heart failure and stroke) in the United States was estimated at $448.5 billion. (This includes direct costs such as costs of doctors, hospital services, medications, etc., and indirect costs such as lost productivity.) In comparison, the estimated economic cost of cancer in 2007 was $219 billion.)