Too Much Marathon Running May Cause Heart Damage (Update1)

By Elizabeth Lopatto

March 14 (Bloomberg) -- Doctors found heart disease in a marathon runner that tests showed was induced by too much exercise, according to a study.

A 51-year-old colleague of doctors at the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore flunked a calcium screening of his heart, a measure used to determine hardening of the arteries, according to a report in the March issue of the American Journal of Cardiology.

Cardiovascular disease is the No. 1 cause of death in America, according to the American Heart Association. Aerobic activity has been shown to reduce the risk of heart disease. The case of the running doctor suggests that too much exercise may have the reverse effect in certain people, the researchers said.

``Moderate activity is fine. Extreme activity requires more caution and evaluation,'' said Michael Miller, director of preventive cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center, in a telephone interview today.

Doctors have known that intense exercise can backfire. Jim Fixx, the author of ``The Complete Book of Running,'' who died after a training run in 1984 is an oft-cited example.

``You get the most bang for your buck with moderate activity,'' said Miller, the study's senior author. ``It's like with alcohol--a moderate amount protects the heart, and above that it's a problem.''

The researchers said that the case is the first example they know of where a person with no coronary risk factors displayed calcium buildup in the heart. Since the doctor was not a smoker, did not have a history of high blood pressure when at rest, was not overweight, and had a ``pretty good'' diet, the researchers zeroed in on his exercise, Miller said.

Two Marathons Annually

Calcium screening is performed by using a CAT scan that can detect a buildup in the arteries. This in turn can indicate that arteries are hardening or becoming clogged, even when other symptoms are lacking, Miller said.

According to the case history, the patient jogged at least one hour a day beginning at the age of 21, and ran 2 marathons every year.

A clue arose when researchers tested how much the runner's vessels open and allow blood to flow freely. His so-called vessel dilation was normal when he was at rest. After exercising his vessels constricted and stayed that way when tested again an hour later.

In order to see if this was unusual, the researchers performed the same tests before and after exercise in a group of ten men, whose average age was 41. Their vessels constricted, but then improved an hour after exercise.

Treatment