

HEART SCANNER SAVED MY LIFE

When Jonjo O'Neill went for a routine check, he found his arteries were so clogged, he needed surgery to prevent a heart attack. The former jockey tells JOHN TRIGGS about the new technology that detected the first signs of trouble

EVEN by the standards of a top jump jockey, where injuries are just part of the job, Jonjo O'Neill has endured more than his fair share of pain.

Early in his career his leg was broken so badly after a fall at one race that the bones ripped through his boot.

In 1980, his shin was shattered in 36 places by a horse's flailing hind legs. The injury took well over a year to heal.

He went on to be a top jockey but in 1986 was diagnosed with lymphatic cancer. He was told that he had little chance of surviving but endured intensive chemotherapy and bravely beat back the disease. He has now been cancer-free since 1989.

So when a couple of months ago Jonjo, 56 - now one of racing's most successful trainers - felt a twinge in his shoulder and back, he could be forgiven for ignoring it.

"I'd had it for a couple of weeks but thought nothing of it," he says. "I suppose I assumed I had just pulled a muscle during work."

In fact, the pain was a sign that there was a dangerous narrowing of one of the arteries close to his heart that, if left untreated, would almost certainly lead to a heart attack which could be fatal.

Jonjo's life was to be saved by a stroke of good fortune.

"I had been paying more attention to my health since the cancer anyway but I was also seeing a heart specialist because my mother had a history of heart disease and I had high cholesterol," says Jonjo, who lives with his wife Jacqui and their two children in Gloucestershire.

Luckily for Jonjo, his heart specialist was Professor Avijit Lahiri, a renowned cardiologist who was trialling a new and more accurate CT scanner at Wellington Hospital in London - the UK's largest private hospital.

CT or computed tomography scanners use X-rays to build up a 3D image of an internal organ.

"The problem is that that the heart is a moving target and so it is difficult to scan accurately," says Professor Lahiri.

"Conventional scanners can miss as much as 30 per cent of the arterial narrowings, which can be the warning signs of an imminent attack."

But with the new machine, called a dual source and dual energy CT scanner, the X-ray device whizzes around the patient so fast it is able to produce a much



CHAMPING AT THE BIT: Racing trainer Jonjo O'Neill is fighting fit again

more accurate picture. While conventional scanners can detect only the hard, calcified plaques in arteries, the new scanner can detect so called soft plaques, which form earlier but can become just as dangerous.

When Jonjo went to see Professor Lahiri in March, he was so unconcerned about the pain he had felt in his shoulder and back that he didn't even mention it.

But Professor Lahiri still had some worries. "I had been monitoring Jonjo's high cholesterol for a few years and although his recent ECG results were still OK there was something about them that was concerning.

"I couldn't put my finger on it but as the new scanner had just come in I thought we might as well use it to make sure nothing was wrong." Jonjo

was told to lie down while the O-shaped scanner moved over his chest.

Jonjo recalls: "I was asked to hold my breath a couple of times for a few seconds each time. The whole thing was over in less than 15 minutes. Afterwards, they showed me the images. I don't know anything about these things but even I could see the artery that was in trouble."

"I didn't have much time to take in the news because they wanted to confirm the results and then operate."

WITHIN days Jonjo had surgery and was fitted with a stent - a tube used to keep the artery open.

Shortly afterwards, he was back in good health again. It was only later that he noticed the pain in his back and shoulder had also vanished.

Professor Lahiri says: "Hopefully, we should see these scanners in all hospitals within the next two years. Jonjo's narrowed artery was like a volcano waiting to erupt and could have killed him. But it wouldn't have been detected on a normal CT scan."

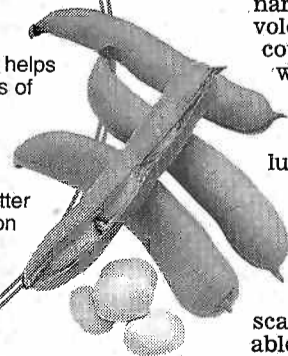
Jonjo agrees. "It's not the first time I've had a lucky escape with my health but I really feel that without that scanner I wouldn't be here today," he says. "I almost popped off but I didn't because the problem was caught in time. If the scanner can help me, it must be able to help others, too."

VEG OF THE WEEK: BROAD BEANS

BROAD beans are a good source of fibre, vitamin C, potassium and folate. A high fibre diet is associated with a lower risk of heart disease, colon cancer and diabetes. Fibre also helps with constipation. Potassium is present in many foods, particularly fruit and veg. It is important for nerve transmission, enabling cells in the body to interact. Potassium also helps to regulate the fluid balance in the body and levels of potassium and sodium affect blood pressure.

DID YOU KNOW? Broad beans also contain levodopa (L-dopa), a chemical that the body uses to produce dopamine, which is the neurotransmitter associated with the brain's reward and motivation system.

● To find out which fruit and veg are in season, see www.iminseason.com



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