

What You Should Know About Keeping Your Heart Healthy

If you are a woman, take this fact to heart: Heart disease is the number one cause of death in women. An estimated 267,000 women die each year from heart attacks—about six times as many as die from breast cancer. In addition, 435,000 women have heart attacks each year, and 8 million are living with heart disease. These numbers are good reasons women should learn how to protect their heart and overall health.

Am I At Risk?

When figuring out which women are most likely to develop diseases, researchers talk about who is most “at risk.” Being at higher risk means that you are more likely to develop a certain disease or problem. You can check your risk of heart disease with the risk calculator at <http://www.americanheart.org/pre-senter.jhtml?identifier=3003500>.

Some things that put you at higher risk of heart disease can’t be changed. For instance:

Increasing age.—Younger women are less likely to have heart attacks; in fact, heart disease is uncommon before the age of menopause, which

is about age 51. However, the problems that lead to heart disease often start at a younger age.

Race.—Between the ages of 44 to 64, black women are twice as likely to experience a heart attack as white women. It is not clear whether race itself increases risk or whether in general black women do not get good health care.

Family History.—Having close relatives (mother, father, brothers, sisters) who had heart attacks at an early age may increase your risk.

However, many risk factors for heart disease are in your own hands and can be prevented or controlled.

Prevent or Control High Blood Pressure

Recently, a national panel of experts recommended that blood pressure be kept even lower—below 120/80 mm Hg—than previously advised. Get your blood pressure checked regularly. If it’s normal, do what you can to help keep it that way. Also, keep your weight in a normal range, and lower the amount of salt in your diet by avoiding added salt, salty foods, and those listing high sodium on their labels. Eat fresh fruits and vegetables and exercise daily.

If you have high blood pressure, work with your health care provider (doctor, nurse practitioner, physician assistant, or pharmacist) to lower your blood pressure. Many effective medications are available; if you have problems with one, you can try others. Let your health care provider know what is and what isn’t working for you.

Prevent or Control Diabetes

Women who have diabetes are 2 to 3 times more likely to have heart attacks than those who do not have diabetes. If you have diabetes, keep it in good control by taking your medication, monitoring your blood sugar, and by exercising and maintaining a normal weight. Studies have shown that people whose diabetes is in good control have less risk of heart attacks and other complications. Your health care provider may also suggest that you take a type of medication called a *statin*. Statin drugs are used to treat high cholesterol but seem to help lower heart attack risk even if you have normal cholesterol.

To prevent diabetes, try to keep your weight in a normal range. Women who had diabetes or high blood sugar during pregnancy are at risk of developing the disease in the future and should be tested regularly.

Stop Smoking

It’s not news that smoking increases risk for serious, life-threatening diseases. If you are a smoker, it’s time to quit. Even if you’re not ready to quit now, write down 10 ways that quitting

This Patient Handout was prepared by Diane E. Judge, APN/CNP using materials from the American Heart Association (<http://www.americanheart.org>), the National Women’s Health Information Center (<http://www.4woman.gov>), the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov>), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<http://www.cdc.gov>), and the National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease (<http://womenheart.org>).

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smoking will benefit you. Read those reasons every day. When you're ready, set a "quit date." Throw away all cigarettes, lighters, matches, ash-trays, and anything else that goes along with smoking. You can get help from your health care provider, local hospitals and clinics, or local chapters of the American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, or American Lung Association. Nicotine patches, gum, nasal sprays, and inhalers are readily available in drug-stores, or your health care provider can prescribe medication to assist you. For an online resource, try <http://www.4women.gov/QuitSmoking/>.

Control Your Cholesterol

You should know your cholesterol level. If you haven't been checked, request a test from your health care provider. The test should be done while fasting, so do not eat for 12 hours before the blood test. You should receive information about your total cholesterol level, LDL (the "bad" cholesterol), triglycerides, and HDL (the "good" cholesterol). Your risk of heart attack is lowest if your total, LDL, and triglycerides are all in the low range and your HDL is high.

Although some women inherit a tendency to have high cholesterol, most women can decrease their total and LDL cholesterol and triglycerides, and raise their HDL with diet and exercise. Read food labels and stay away from such high fat items as fried foods, whole milk, cheese, butter, and processed foods with high saturated fat content. Instead of fried foods, substitute baked, broiled, or grilled meats and fish, and use nonfat milk, yogurt, and cottage cheese in place of whole milk products. Eating nuts daily seems to help protect your heart, but be careful: Nuts are high in calories. Eat only a small handful, and use them instead of, not in addition to, high fat snacks. Eating fish twice a

week and exercising helps increase your HDL. If diet and exercise don't work, medications can be used to control cholesterol.

Watch Your Weight

Body Mass Index (BMI) is a way of using your height and weight to find out if your weight is in the healthy range. You can find a BMI calculator at <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/calc-bmi.htm>, or calculate it by hand by using the following formula:

$$\text{BMI} = \frac{\text{your weight in pounds}}{(\text{your height in inches}) \times (\text{your height in inches})} \times 703$$

If the answer is more than 25, you need to lose weight. You can get weight loss suggestions from your health care provider, or at <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity/resources.htm>.

Exercise Regularly

Getting at least 30 minutes of exercise daily or almost daily is good for weight loss, increasing your HDL cholesterol, and making you feel good, as well as decreasing your risk of heart disease. Decide what will fit into your daily routine; find something you like and/or can do easily for exercise. Walk, run, ride a bike, or go to the gym—alone or with an exercise partner. Do it one day at a time until you're in the habit. Be sure to talk to your health care provider before you start a strenuous exercise regimen.

Be Informed About Heart Attack Symptoms

Women who have heart attacks are more likely to die than men, perhaps because they don't believe they are having a heart attack or don't want to bother anyone when they're ill. But prompt action is important because heart attack victims are more likely to

recover if they are treated quickly.

Classic symptoms include an uncomfortable feeling of pressure, fullness, squeezing, or pain, either coming and going over a period of time or lasting for more than a few minutes. The feeling may spread to the shoulder, neck, back, jaw, or left arm, and may be accompanied by lightheadedness, excessive sweating, difficulty breathing, or nausea. However, in some women, heart attack symptoms are vague or different from men's

symptoms. They may experience unusual pain in the chest or abdomen, persistent nausea or dizziness,

unexplained feelings of anxiety or dread, cold, sweaty, pale skin, or unexplained leg swelling.

If you have heart attack symptoms, immediately call your local emergency system or an ambulance, or get to the nearest emergency room. Also, take one regular strength aspirin tablet to help prevent heart damage. Do not hesitate to call for help. It is better to hear that the symptoms were a false alarm than to miss your chance to survive a heart attack.

Resources

The Heart Truth: A National Awareness Campaign for Women About Heart Disease:
<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/hearttruth/index.htm>

The National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease
<http://womenheart.org/>

National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, WISEWOMAN program:
<http://www.cdc.gov/wisewoman/factsandtools.htm>