

## Heart Disease in Women

### Is heart disease a problem for women?

Heart disease is the leading cause of death of American women. More women die from heart disease than from all cancers combined.

In the first year after a heart attack, women have an increased risk of death. In the first 6 years after a heart attack, they also have a higher risk of a second heart attack. Women are at high risk often because they are older at the time of the heart attack and have other medical problems.

The warning signs of a heart attack are:

- ✓ chest discomfort in the center of the chest that lasts for more than a few minutes, or that goes away and comes back
- ✓ pain or discomfort in other areas of the upper body, including the arms, back, neck, jaw, or stomach
- ✓ shortness of breath
- ✓ breaking out in a cold sweat
- ✓ nausea, indigestion, or heartburn
- ✓ lightheadedness

Sometimes you can be having a heart attack and not know it. Many women have chest pain or pressure, but sometimes symptoms in women are different from men's symptoms. Or women may have additional symptoms, such as:

- ✓ sudden weakness or unexplained tiredness
- ✓ unexplained anxiety and nervousness
- ✓ swelling of the ankles or lower legs

Because they may not feel the typical pain in the left side of their chest, many women may ignore the symptoms of a heart attack.

### How can women reduce their risk for heart disease?

- If you have high blood pressure, carefully follow your healthcare provider's instructions for keeping it under control.
- If you are a smoker, stop smoking.
- Lose weight if you are overweight. Maintain a healthy weight.
- Eat a healthy diet that includes:
  - ✓ avoiding salty foods and not adding salt to food
  - ✓ increasing fiber, fruits, and vegetables
  - ✓ avoiding foods high in fat and cholesterol

- Exercise according to your healthcare provider's instructions.
- Get enough rest and learn to use relaxation methods to help reduce stress.
- Treat and control medical conditions such as diabetes and high cholesterol.

If you are taking hormone therapy, you and your healthcare provider should discuss the risks and benefits. Hormone therapy may increase the risk for heart disease or stroke.

Talk with your provider about taking aspirin. Low-dose aspirin therapy reduces the risk of stroke for women. But it helps to lower rates of heart attack and other cardiac problems only in women 65 and older.

Make sure that your provider knows about any other medicines you are taking. If you decide you need to make changes in the way you live, you probably won't be able to turn your life around all at once. Try to develop healthy habits that incorporate your lifestyle goals. If you do, you will greatly decrease your chances for developing heart disease.

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