

Heart Disease- What You Don't Know Can Hurt You

Put your hand over the center of your chest. What you are feeling is the strongest muscle in your body- your heart.

The heart is an incredible organ. It beats about 100,000 times a day. The adult heart pumps about 5 quarts of blood each minute – approximately 2,000 gallons of blood each day – throughout the body. So, as you can probably imagine, your heart needs constant care and maintenance to function properly. If the functions of your heart begin to breakdown, that condition is known as cardiovascular (heart) disease.

Cardiovascular disease is the #1 killer of American women and men. In fact, about one in four women (and about one in three men) die of heart disease. However, heart disease doesn't always kill. It can also lead to disability and a significantly decreased quality of life. So, it's important to understand what heart disease is and the factors that determine your heart health.

When referring to heart disease, most people think of a particular type—coronary artery disease (CAD). This occurs when there is a build-up of tissue and cholesterol that narrows the arteries responsible for carrying blood to the heart. This is not uncommonly associated with other forms of vascular disease, such as peripheral vascular disease, stroke, and aneurysm. Coronary artery disease can lead to heart attack and to heart failure. There are other causes of heart disease, but CAD is the most common and among the most preventable. You need to understand and to control risk factors for CAD.

You can't control certain risk factors like age, gender, race and family history. You can control an unhealthy diet, smoking, obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and lack of exercise.

Whatever your risk factors, knowing the symptoms of vascular disease, specifically of a heart attack or stroke, can save your life. The sooner treatment is administered, the greater your chances for survival.

The symptoms of a heart attack may include:

- Chest discomfort that lasts more than a few minutes or that goes and comes in spurts
- Discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, stomach or jaw
- Shortness of breath
- Suddenly breaking out in a cold sweat or a feeling of nausea or light-headedness

RISK FACTORS FOR HEART DISEASE

Women develop symptomatic heart disease an average of 10 to 15 years later than men. The risk of heart disease increases dramatically once a woman reaches age 50, the approximate age of natural menopause (Estrogen helps a woman's body protect her against heart disease. After menopause, heart disease becomes more of a risk for women because of the reduced level of estrogen). In young women who have undergone early or surgical menopause, the risk of heart disease is also higher, especially when combined with other risk factors such as:

- Diabetes
- Smoking
- High blood pressure (>130/85 mm/Hg)
- High LDL (lousy) cholesterol (>130 mg/dl)
- High triglycerides (>150 mg/dl)
- Low HDL (good) cholesterol (<55 mg/dl)
- Obesity
- Sedentary lifestyle
- Family history of heart disease
- Race- African American and Hispanic women in particular have high rates of the major risk factors for heart disease

The symptoms of a stroke may include:

- Sudden weakness or numbness in the face, arm, or leg (usually on one side of the body)
- Sudden confusion or difficulty speaking
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Sudden loss of balance or coordination
- Sudden severe headache (with no known cause)

Now, ladies, pay attention. Your heart attack symptoms may be different than those experienced by men. Heart disease is sometimes misdiagnosed because your symptoms present differently. Pay attention to these additional warning signs:

- Irregular heartbeat
- Flu-like symptoms- nausea or vomiting
- Abdominal discomfort or indigestion (burning sensation in upper abdomen or chest)
- Unexplained fatigue

In order to reduce the chances of a heart attack or stroke, know your risk factors and modify your lifestyle; exercise regularly, adjust your diet, and quit smoking. It's important to talk with your doctor about ways to control your blood pressure and cholesterol. Most importantly, know your numbers! Ignorance is not bliss when it comes to heart disease. What you know can save your life!

*Go Red for Women is a program that builds awareness of heart disease as **the leading cause of death in women**. Beginning with National Wear Red Day on February 1, American Heart Month encourages everyone to know your risk factors for heart disease and improve your heart health. You can learn more about American Heart Month and Go Red for Women by visiting www.americanheart.org.*

Heart at Work

Tips for staying heart healthy during the workday

- Take the stairs instead of the elevator
- Eat regular meals throughout the day, breakfast and lunch with a healthy snack in between
- Replace your emergency candy and chips drawer with some health snack, such as nuts, whole grains, and vegetables
- Take a brisk walk during your lunch break (outside if it's nice, inside during these lovely northeast winters)
- Challenge your co-workers to adopt a healthier lifestyle with you by establishing weight loss goals with an incentive
- QUIT SMOKING