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Considering... Heart Disease and Women

What You Need to Know to Reduce Your Risk

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Report From the
Committee on Cardiovascular and Metabolic Diseases™

What's So Important About Heart Disease?

Although *coronary heart disease (CHD)* is the leading cause of death for US women—killing 500,000 each year, which amounts to about one death per minute—a surprising amount of women (just 13%) view it as their greatest health threat. *Cardiovascular disease (CVD)* includes many deadly conditions, including *heart attack* and *stroke*. Understanding your risk for these diseases and what you can do to prevent them can truly mean the difference between life and death.

Isn't CHD a "Man's Disease"?

No! Although women develop CHD about 10 years later than men do, women of all ages should be aware of their risk. *Consider this:* women are *six times* more likely to die of CHD than breast cancer. Plus, after having a severe, sudden event, such as a heart attack, women are more likely than men to die within 1 year. By age 65, a woman's risk is usually the same as a man's.

What Are the Risks for CHD in Women?

They're the same for men and women. Some are *controllable*, meaning they can be treated and sometimes even reversed with appropriate *lifestyle changes*, including a healthy diet and exercise. Prescription medications may also be used to help patients reach their goals. Other risk factors, such as family history and age, cannot be controlled. With your doctor's help, you can find out your risk and create a prevention plan that's right for you.

Are There Any Symptoms of CHD and Stroke to Look Out For?

Although chest pain is not always caused by CHD, it should still be a cause for concern. *Consider this:* 64% of women who died suddenly of CHD had no previous symptoms.

Contact your doctor immediately if you experience:

- pressure, heaviness, or a sensation of tightness/squeezing in your chest
- pain in your shoulder, neck, or jaw
- sudden shortness of breath, indigestion, palpitations, or nausea and/or vomiting
- numbness/weakness in the face, arm, or leg (usually on one side of the body)
- confusion or trouble speaking, understanding, or seeing in one or both eyes
- difficulty walking or a feeling of dizziness or loss of balance
- severe headache without cause

REFERENCES: American Heart Association. *Heart Disease and Stroke Statistics—2006 Update*. Available at: <http://www.americanheart.org>. • Heart disease and heart attacks: what women should know. Available at: <http://www.familydoctor.org>. • Go Red For Women: Heart Disease. Available at: <http://goredforwomen.org>. All accessed June 16, 2006.

Controllable Risk Factors

What You Can Do

High cholesterol

- Your level should be *less than 100 mg/dL*
- Limit dietary cholesterol by replacing lean meats like chicken (roasted or baked without skin) for red meats; also opt for fat-free/low-fat dairy products and egg substitutes

High blood pressure

- Your blood pressure should be *less than 120/80 mm Hg*
- Always look for *sodium* (salt) content on nutrition labels; your daily intake should be *less than 2,400 mg*
- Use a salt substitute and eliminate salty foods like potato chips from your diet

Overweight/Obesity

- Avoid *saturated* and *trans* fats (found in red meats, high-fat dairy products, and processed or "junk" foods)
- Keep fat calories to *30% or less* of your total daily calories
- Get moving! Exercise for 15 to 30 minutes on most days (remember to check with your doctor before starting an exercise routine)

Smoking

- If you smoke, quit; if you don't smoke, don't start! Quitting can lower your heart attack risk by one-third within 2 years!
- Try an over-the-counter nicotine product or ask your doctor about prescription medications that can help you to stop

Diabetes

- Schedule and keep regular check-ups with your doctor
- Exercise regularly and eat a low-fat diet as recommended by your doctor
- Always take the diabetes medicines that your doctor has prescribed