



# Women's Heart Health

(What women need to know about heart disease)

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## Introduction

Heart disease, once thought to be a man's disease, is the leading cause of death in women. The US Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the American Heart Association (AHA) report that heart disease kills an estimated 240,000 American women every year. This number is five times the number of women who die from breast cancer.

- Women suffer about 49 percent of the 480,000 heart disease deaths that occur in America every year.
- More women than men die from a heart attack within the first year of their first heart attack (44 percent versus 27 percent).
- Heart attacks kill 21,000 women under the age of 65. Twenty-nine percent of them are under the age of 55. One in eight women age 45 and over has had a heart attack.
- Black women have 33 percent higher death rate from coronary heart disease than white women. They also have a 77 percent higher death rate from stroke.
- Coronary heart disease is a risk factor for stroke. Strokes kill over 87,000 women annually. Below are nine critical questions and answers about women and heart disease:

### 1. What are the risk factors of heart disease for women?

Risk factors of heart disease are conditions or behaviors that can increase women's chances of developing heart disease. Risk factors can also be changeable or unchangeable. While women cannot do anything about the unchangeable risk factors like age, family history, race, or gender, they can lower or modify the changeable risk factors.

The major heart disease risk factors that can be modified, controlled, or treated are:

- Tobacco use
- High cholesterol
- High blood pressure



- Physical inactivity
- Obesity or overweight
- Diabetes
- Excess stress

### 2. What are the warning signs of a heart attack and a stroke?

Common general warning signs of heart attack are:

- Uncomfortable pressure, fullness, squeezing or pain in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes or goes away and comes back.
- Pain that spreads to the shoulders, neck, or arms.
- Chest discomfort with lightheadedness, fainting, sweating, nausea, or shortness of breath.

Women may have less common warning signs such as:

- Atypical, unusual chest pain, stomach, or abdominal pain.

- Nausea or dizziness.
- Shortness of breath and difficulty breathing.
- Unexplained anxiety, weakness, or fatigue.
- Palpitations, cold sweat, or paleness.

Do not expect all symptoms to occur in every attack but pay attention and report those that occur.

### 3. What is the effect of menopause on women's hearts?

- Scientists believe that estrogen, a hormone produced by women's bodies, offers some protection against heart disease and stroke before menopause. As menopause approaches, women's risk of heart attacks begin to rise and keep rising as they age. If menopause is caused by surgery (surgical menopause) to remove the uterus and ovaries, the risk of heart attack rises sharply. If menopause occurs naturally, the risk increases more slowly.
- Women who have natural or surgical menopause may consider hormone replacement therapy (HRT) to help relieve symptoms of menopause and protect against osteoporosis. A healthcare provider should be contacted for more information about hormone replacement therapy.

### 4. Do women need to lose or gain weight to be heart-healthy?

- Women who are overweight or obese have higher risks of heart disease and stroke, even if they do not have other risk factors. Obesity is a risk factor for heart disease, stroke, and also influences blood pressure, blood cholesterol, and triglyceride levels. Obesity also makes women more likely to develop other chronic conditions such as diabetes.
- By working closely with a healthcare provider or registered dietitian, women can develop sensible eating programs and physical activity plans to reduce the risk of heart disease. A gradual weight loss program through controlling the diet can lead to weight loss. Weight loss programs that promise rapid results are not recommended.
- When underweight, a health care provider or registered dietitian can advise women on how to gain weight. Adding nutrient-dense foods can help women gain weight healthfully.

### 5. Do healthy eating habits benefit women's hearts?

- Better food habits can help reduce high cholesterol, which is one of the major factors of heart disease. The best way to help lower blood cholesterol levels is to eat less saturated fat (fat from animal sources) and cholesterol, maintain a healthy weight, and increase physical activity. The American Heart Association's dietary guidelines provide an easy-to-follow guide to healthy eating or eating with the heart in mind.

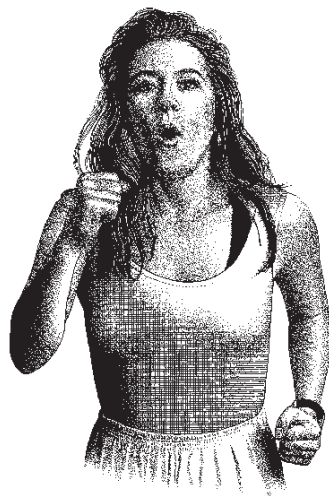
- The healthy eating plan guidelines include:
  - Total fat intake should be less than 30 percent of calories.
  - Saturated fat intake should be 8 to 10 percent of calories.
  - Polyunsaturated fat intake should be up to 10 percent of calories. Monounsaturated fat makes up the rest of the total fat intake, up to 15 percent of total calories.
  - Cholesterol intake should be less than 300 milligrams per day.
  - Sodium intake should be no more than 2400 milligrams per day.
- When selecting foods, it is important to consider foods low in saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium. Read the nutrient facts label and ingredient statements on food containers to discover what nutrients are in a product.
- It is important to remember that every basic food group supplies a different combination of nutrients, vitamins, and minerals. Remember that variety is the key to good nutrition. The basic food groups and recommended servings are as follows:

Lean meat, poultry, and fish	No more than 6 oz. (cooked) per day
Eggs	No more than 3-4 yolks per week. (This restriction does not apply to egg whites.)
Vegetables and fruits	5 or more per day
Fat-free milk and low-fat dairy products	2-4 per day
Breads, cereals, pasta, and starchy vegetables	6 or more per day
Fats, oils, nuts, and sweets	Use sparingly

### 6. What kind of physical activity is right for women's hearts?

- The heart and lungs require vigorous activities like brisk walking, running, and swimming, for 30-60 minutes, three to four times a week for proper health. Regular physical activity improves heart and lung fitness and helps reduce risk of heart attack and stroke. Regular physical activity also makes one feel and look better.
- Women do not have to become exercise fanatics to lower the risk of heart disease. Recent research shows that significant health benefits can

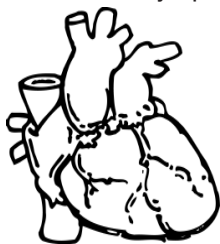
be achieved by doing low-to-moderate-intensity physical activity for a total of 30 minutes a day on most days. Heart-health benefits can also be achieved by doing two, 15-minute periods of exercise such as walking, yard work, housework, or even dancing per day.



- To improve chances in succeeding in physical activity, find an enjoyable activity and stick with it. Check with a doctor before starting a vigorous exercise program when a chronic disease like high blood pressure or diabetes is present, especially if you've been inactive for a long time or have other medical conditions.

### 7. How does high blood pressure influence women's hearts?

- Blood pressure is the force that the heart exerts on the walls of the arteries. High blood pressure usually has no symptoms. The only way to discover high blood pressure is to measure it.



Blood pressure should be checked at least every two years or as often as recommended by a healthcare provider. Blood pressure readings are written as two numbers, such as 120/80mmHg (millimeters of mercury).

- The first or bigger number is the systolic pressure (the pressure when the heart beats). The second number is the diastolic pressure (the pressure when the heart is between beats or resting). High blood pressure, or hypertension, is defined as readings of 140/90 or greater that stays high for an extended period of time.

Blood Pressure	High			High Hypertension
	Optimal	Normal	Normal	
Systolic (top #)	less than 120	less than 130	130-139	140 or higher
Diastolic (bottom #)	less than 80	less than 85	85-90	90 or higher

### 8. How do blood cholesterol levels influence women's hearts?

- Cholesterol is a fat-like substance that is involved in the formation of plaque found in diseased arteries.

There are two main types of cholesterol.

- Low-density lipoproteins (LDL). High LDL cholesterol is deposited in artery walls, increasing the buildup of plaque. High LDL cholesterol increases the risk of heart disease and heart attack.
- High density lipoproteins (HDL) or good cholesterol seems to clear cholesterol out of system, and lowers the risk of heart disease. Low levels of HDL appear to be a stronger risk factor for women than for men. It's important to have blood levels of total and HDL cholesterol checked, especially if the family has a history of high cholesterol or premature heart disease.

Cholesterol Levels (mg/dl)	Desirable (Low Risk)	Borderline-High Risk	High Risk
Total cholesterol	less than 200	200-239	240 or higher
LDL ("bad")	less than 130	130-159	160 or higher
HDL ("good")	35 or higher	less than 35	less than 35

### 9. How can women become actively involved in lowering their risk of heart disease?

- Take more responsibility for their health. Ask health-care providers questions. No question is stupid. If questions aren't answered satisfactorily, ask for a referral to someone who can give a second medical opinion.
- Learn more about risk factors and have regular checkups.
- Reduce the risk factors easily controlled:
  - Cut the amount and kinds of fat and cholesterol in diet.
  - Stop smoking and avoid other people's tobacco smoke.
  - Control high blood pressure.
  - When taking birth control pills, talk with a health-care provider about using lower-dose pills that pose less risk and could be protective of heart disease.
  - Be more physically active. For example, use stairs instead of elevators!
  - Maintain a healthy weight.
  - Take medicine when the doctor prescribes it.

- Learn to relax and find healthful ways to deal with stressful situations. Unhealthy responses to stress may lead to other risk behaviors like smoking and overeating.
  - Get friends and family to join in a healthy way of life.
  - Make changes slowly in a family's diet and exercise habits.
  - Share heart-healthy cooking tips and recipes with friends.
  - Suggest that the church, synagogue, or community group hold a blood pressure or cholesterol screening.
  - Find a partner to exercise with for three or four times a week.
  - Turn off the TV and do something active as a family.
  - Support friends and family who want to quit smoking.
- Take action in the community and workplace:
    - Ask for healthier food choices in grocery stores, restaurants, and company's vending machines or cafeteria.
    - Insist on a nonsmoking section in restaurants and other public places.
    - Request a smoke-free workplace.
    - Start a fitness walking club or exercise class.

Know the warning signs of heart attack and stroke, and don't delay in getting professional help when signs are noticed.

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## Internet Sources:

<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/cvd/womensatlas/index.htm>  
This site links to publications relevant to heart disease among women.

[http://hin.nhlbi.nih.gov/womencvd/wrkshp/education\\_programs.pdf](http://hin.nhlbi.nih.gov/womencvd/wrkshp/education_programs.pdf) This is the site of the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute which provides educational information and other links about heart disease in women.

<http://women.americanheart.org/> This is the American Heart Association's site that provides heart health educational information that targets women.