



Heart health for women

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Even today, many people consider heart disease mostly a man's illness. That has probably never been true, but early

research focussed on men's health and the misperception was formed. Heart disease is much more equal opportunity. In fact, each year seven times more Canadian women die of heart attacks and stroke than breast cancer.

The main difference between men and women is that women tend to face the problem about 10 years later than men. It is believed that estrogen levels may help protect women until menopause by keeping cholesterol in check. By age 75 there is little difference between men and women.

Cardiovascular disease is essentially three things: coronary heart disease which includes heart attacks, strokes and heart failure.

Women are affected differently by these. For example, fewer women have heart attacks, but more of them die from it than do men. The most common symptom of a heart attack is chest pain or pressure, for both genders, but women are more likely to describe it differently, sometimes leading to delays in treatment.

Preventing or reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease is possible as there are many things under our control. These are some of the essentials, and yes, men will benefit from the same preventative steps.

First, don't smoke. Smoking is the single worst thing you can do to your heart. About two-thirds of heart attacks among middle-aged women are caused by smoking. Smoking while taking birth control pills raises the risk even more.

Knowing and controlling your blood pressure and levels of blood cholesterol are important. Hypertension (high blood pressure) is a major risk factor for a stroke

or heart attack. Blood cholesterol is another risk factor. Keep HDL (bad) cholesterol less than 130 mg/dL (100 is better) and LDL (good) cholesterol at 50 or better for women (40 for men).

Elevated blood sugar and diabetes are a further risk of stroke for women. Even slightly high levels (call pre-diabetes) increase the risk.

Choose a heart-healthy diet including lots of vegetables, fruits, beans, whole grains and dairy products. Eat fish two or three times a week and stay with small portions of lean cuts of meat and skinless chicken breast.

Along with the better food, cut back on sodium — it contributes to hypertension and stroke.

This one is good for everybody: get or stay active. The payoff of physical activity is not only a happier, healthier life, but it also reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease. At the same time, it will help control weight

because not only does excess weight increase the risk of cardiovascular disease, the potential resulting hypertension and

diabetes each also increase the risk of heart problems.

Taking a low-dose aspirin has been shown to reduce heart attacks in men, and strokes in women, especially after 65. Talk to your physician about adding this to your routine.

The most serious health problem facing women is heart disease and stroke. If you do have heart disease, make sure you understand your health problem as well as possible. Then, learn what you can do to manage it. The Canadian Heart & Stroke Foundation at <http://www.heartandstroke.ca> is a clear and thorough source of information. See their website or look contact them for educational materials.

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