

Ask the Expert
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Q: I've recently learned that heart disease is a major health concern for women. What steps can I take to lower my risk?

A: Heart disease, which is often thought of as a man's disease, can also be devastating to women. According to the American Heart Association, coronary heart disease, which precludes a heart attack, is the leading cause of death for women in the United States. Nearly twice as many women will die of heart disease, stroke and other cardiovascular diseases as from all forms of cancer, including breast cancer. The National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute also states that 64 percent of women who died suddenly from coronary heart disease had no previous symptoms of the disease.

It's not widely known that some of the risk factors are different for women than for men. The symptoms of heart disease also tend to be more mild for women, and they often strike without warning. Many don't realize that heart disease is a major health concern for women, and many will not make the necessary lifestyle changes or respond to symptoms once they occur.

However, there are some steps you may take to protect yourself from heart disease:

- **Don't smoke.** One of the largest contributors to heart disease is smoking. More than half of the heart attacks in women under 50 are related to smoking. By quitting, you can lower your risk of heart attack by one-third within two years.
- **Keep your blood pressure under control.** Treating high blood pressure can significantly lower your risk of heart attack and stroke. Losing weight, regular exercise and a healthy diet all contribute to effectively controlling your high blood pressure. If your blood pressure remains high, your physician may recommend a prescription medication to help keep it under control.
- **Monitor your cholesterol.** If you aren't sure of your numbers, ask your physician to check it. Diet plays an integral role in lowering high cholesterol levels. Keep fat calories to 30 percent or less of the total calories you eat during a day and avoid saturated fat. Some people may need to take medication in addition to diet and exercise, so make sure to consult your physician.
- **Maintain a healthy weight.** Extra weight puts strain on your heart. Incorporating exercise, in addition to a low-fat diet, into your routine will help you lose weight. Aerobic exercise, such as brisk walking, swimming, jogging or biking, will provide your heart with an optimal workout. Try to exercise at least 30 to 60 minutes, four to six times a week.



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- **Know your family history.** Having a father or brother with heart disease before age 55, or a mother or sister with heart disease before age 65, are factors that contribute to heart disease. Make sure to share your family history with your physician.

Be sure to contact your physician immediately if you suffer from pain in your chest, shoulder, neck or jaw. Also notify your doctor if you experience shortness of breath or nausea that comes on quickly. If you are having a heart attack, get to the nearest emergency room as soon as possible.

If you are unsure if you are at risk for developing heart disease, please take the next seven minutes and log on to www.chwhealthspan.org/heartaware to take the free evaluation. It could save your life.



Darcel Taylor, R.N., is the cardiac clinician for CHW's HeartAware™ program. To learn more about HeartAware™, or to arrange for a free, in-person consultation, please visit www.chwhealthspan.org/heartaware or call 480.728.3639.