

Take care of your ticker
by Mike DeCinti

So, have you seen more people wearing red this month? Curious why so many women had on red dresses last Friday? Well hopefully if you did, it reminded you that February is American Heart Month and it is an important time for all of us to remember that we must take care of our heart, if it's going to take care of us. And this year, women's heart health is front and center of it all.

The truth is that heart disease is the number one killer of American women. In fact, 1 in 4 women die of heart disease. But heart disease can also lead to disability and a significantly decreased quality of life.

Unfortunately, women often fail to make the connection between risk factors, such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol, and their own chance of developing heart disease.

Coronary heart disease is the main form of heart disease. It is a disorder of the blood vessels of the heart that can lead to heart attack. A heart attack happens when an artery becomes blocked, preventing oxygen and nutrients from getting to the heart. Often referred to simply as heart disease, it is one of several cardiovascular diseases, which are diseases of the heart and blood vessel system. Other cardiovascular diseases include stroke, high blood pressure, angina and rheumatic heart disease.

Heart disease is a lifelong condition. Once you get it, you'll always have it. Procedures such as bypass surgery and angioplasty can help blood and oxygen flow to the heart more easily, but the arteries remain damaged, which means you are more likely to have a heart attack. What's more, the condition of your blood vessels will steadily worsen unless you make changes in your daily habits. Many women die of complications from heart disease, or become permanently disabled. That's why it is so vital to take action to prevent and control this disease. Here are the risk factors we all need to be aware of:

- High blood pressure
- High blood cholesterol
- Diabetes
- Smoking
- Being overweight
- Being physically inactive
- Having a family history of early heart disease
- Age (55 or older for women) After menopause, women are more apt to get heart disease, in part because their body's production of estrogen drops. Women who have gone through early menopause, are twice as likely to develop heart disease.

While certain risk factors cannot be changed, it is important to realize that you do have control over many others. Some women believe that doing just one healthy thing will take care of all of their heart disease risks. They may think that if they walk or swim regularly, they can still smoke. This is NOT true. To protect your heart, it is vital to make changes that address each risk factor you have. Each one greatly increases a woman's

chance of developing heart disease. But having more than one is especially serious, because risk factors tend to team up and worsen each other's effects. So, every woman needs to take her heart disease risk seriously and take action now to reduce that risk.

The first step toward heart health is becoming aware of your own personal risk for heart disease. So you'll need to gather some information to create your personal heart profile. A crucial step is to see your doctor for a thorough checkup. Then try to follow these steps:

- Don't smoke, and if you do, quit.
- Aim for a healthy weight.
- Get moving with physical activity
- Choose a diet low in saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol.
- Ask your doctor to check your blood pressure, cholesterol (total, HDL, LDL, triglycerides), and blood glucose. Work with your doctor to improve any numbers that are not normal.

For more information talk with your primary healthcare provider and use the opportunity of American Heart Month to make sure you and the ones you love are taking care of their heart.

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