



6 Things Every Woman Should Know About Heart Health

Heart disease is the nation's leading killer of women. But paying attention to risk factors and living a healthy lifestyle can help keep heart disease at bay.

"It's an equal opportunity killer," said Dr. Jennifer Mieres, a professor of cardiology at the Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra/Northwell in New York. "Women in mid-life are definitely at the highest risk. It's a volatile time for women, as the menopause transition is marked by changes in body composition, fat distribution and an increase in cholesterol levels."

According to the American Heart Association, 80% of cardiovascular diseases are preventable.

Get annual checkups: It's important to get annual checkups to assess heart-health risk and take action, Mieres said. Prepare for the appointment, much as you would when gathering documents to meet with a financial adviser.

"You go to your accountant at tax time, and you don't show up empty-handed," she said. Be prepared to discuss any family history of heart disease or other concerns. "You should not be passive. You should have a conversation."

Know the symptoms of a heart attack: Women's heart attack symptoms may cover a wider spectrum compared with symptoms in men. Women may experience the "classic" heart attack symptoms of chest pressure, chest discomfort or shortness of breath, just as men do.

"But women also may have symptoms such as back pain, usually on the left side; shoulder pain; a fullness in the stomach; or nausea as signs of an impending heart attack," cautioned Mieres.

Tell your doctor if you had a pregnancy complication: Recent research has focused on heart disease linked to pregnancy-related complications. Diabetes and hypertension during pregnancy as well as early delivery have been linked to increased cardiovascular disease risk years later. "Pregnancy is a stress test" for the body, a possible marker for heart disease later in life, said Mieres.

Get enough sleep: Lack of sleep – getting less than six or seven hours a night – is connected to heart disease, research has shown. Poor sleep has been linked to high blood pressure, can make it difficult to lose weight and may make you less likely to want to exercise.

Tame stress: Chronic stress is another area of concern for women. It can lead to behaviors and factors that impact heart disease, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, inactivity and overeating. To cope with stress, eat healthy foods, exercise and get plenty of sleep. Consider talking to others about your stress, including a friend, parent, doctor or counselor.

Find a health partner: In all heart-healthy efforts, it helps to have a partner in the endeavor, Mieres said. Work with a health care provider to find a customized treatment plan that fits your daily life and medical needs. A friend, family member or co-worker also can be a good partner for getting physically active and sticking with a healthy eating plan.

"It's OK if you fall off the wagon. You have that person to help you get back on track," said Mieres. "There is strength in numbers."

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