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Living

Women can take steps to reduce risk of heart disease

by Dr. Brian Asbill GUEST COLUMNIST
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Many, if not most women perceive breast cancer to be their greatest health risk. In truth, American women are four to six times more likely to die of cardiovascular disease.

Advertisement Did you know that 1 in 5 women have heart disease? Not only is heart disease the leading cause of death in women, but it claims more lives than the next eight causes of death combined. In fact, a woman dies from heart disease every 34 seconds.

Why do we continue to think of heart disease as an illness of men? Perhaps it is because women often develop heart disease later in life than men – typically seven to eight years later. However, by about age 65, a woman's risk is essentially the same as a man's. The rates of heart attack in women age 35 to 64 have also been increasing over the past 20 years.

In addition to the typical symptoms of pain or discomfort in the chest, the first sign of heart disease in women is often "atypical:" shortness of breath, pain in the neck, jaw or upper back; nausea with or without vomiting; unexplained sweating; severe fatigue or dizziness.

The good news is that the risk can be reduced, for both men and women. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, reports that Americans can lower their risk of heart disease by as much as 82 percent just by leading a healthy lifestyle.

What can women do to decrease the risk of heart disease?

- Avoid smoking. Cigarette smoking more than doubles your risk of dying from heart disease.
- Exercise regularly. Aim for 30-50 minutes, four to six days a week.
- Maintain a healthy weight. Extra weight puts strain on your heart and increases your risk for diabetes and high blood pressure, two risk factors for heart disease. Diabetes more than doubles the risk of heart attack.
- Eat a heart healthy diet. Eating a diet low in saturated fats and high in fruits, vegetables, fish and olive oil is associated with a decreased risk of death. Populations that eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day live longer lives and have not only less heart disease, but also fewer stroke and cancers.
- Control your blood pressure. After age 65, a much higher percentage of women than men have high blood pressure. Even if your blood pressure has always been "good," it needs to be rechecked routinely, as blood pressure rises as we age.
- Monitor your cholesterol. A healthy diet helps to lower your cholesterol levels, but cholesterol levels are partly determined by genetics. The addition of medication may be necessary to reduce your risk if diet is not enough.

Taking these steps will ensure that you are doing everything you can to minimize your risk of heart disease. If you are experiencing symptoms that you feel might be warning signs of heart disease, discuss them with your doctor. Getting on the road to healthy heart is something everyone should do — especially women.

Dr. Brian Asbill joined Asheville Cardiology Associates in 2001. He is board certified in cardiology and clinical lipidology and serves on the board of the WNC/BCMS Foundation. He is the current Cardiology Service Line Leader at Mission Hospital.



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