

# How Women Can Reduce Their Risk of Heart Disease

More women die from heart disease each year than all forms of cancer combined, but there are ways to they can reduce their risk for developing heart disease. Some are simple changes in lifestyle while others are more complicated and may require medical treatment. But, it is important for women to understand that their risk for heart disease is real and some risk factors are unique to women. So, knowing how to reduce the risks of heart disease is essential. Here are the basics:

- 1. Know the numbers.** There are several important numbers regarding a woman's health that she should be aware of and monitor as she ages.
  - a. Cholesterol** - The two types of cholesterol- LDL (the bad) and HDL (the good). It is ideal to maintain a level no higher than 100 for LDL and maintain a level of 60 or higher of HDL. Depending on a woman's specific risk factors, the ideal number can fluctuate. A total number of 200 or less is recommended for overall cholesterol levels.
  - b. Body Mass Index (BMI)** - The numbers on the scale are less important than the BMI. There are numerous Websites that offer BMI calculators. A woman must know her current weight and height in inches for the calculation. A BMI of 25 or more is considered a risk and 30 or more is high risk.
  - c. Blood Pressure** - The two numbers to consider are systolic and diastolic pressure. The systolic pressure is the pressure when the heart beats and it should be under 120. Diastolic pressure is in between the beats and it should be less than 80.
- 2. Stop Smoking!** Smoking affects a lot more than the lungs. It affects the heart by constricting the blood vessels and lowers the level of good cholesterol in the body. This means that plaque builds up faster, blocking the flow of blood. Women on birth control may significantly increase their risk of heart disease. Smoking also inhibits leading an active lifestyle which can lead to weight gain and then to high cholesterol. This is a dangerous chain of events that can end in a heart attack.
- 3. Get moving!** Exercise is essential for a healthy heart. The Mayo Clinic recommends at least 30 minutes to an hour of exercise a day. Cardiovascular exercise gets the heart pumping, strengthens it and improves blood flow. It also helps a woman lose weight, particularly the fat that accumulates at the waistline.
- 4. See a physician.** Dr. Yessenow says "this is especially important for a woman who has a family history of heart disease and for post-menopausal women." Even if she doesn't fall into these categories, talking with her doctor about her risk is important. It may be necessary to control issues like blood pressure and cholesterol with medication. During perimenopause, when estrogen levels are declining, birth control pills can be used. According to The Cleveland Clinic Heart Center, using hormone replacement therapy in post-menopausal women is no longer a recommended treatment for heart disease because research results showed that lifestyle changes, not the HRT, were responsible for improvement.

- 5.** Take medications as prescribed. This may seem like a no-brainer, but it is essential to take blood pressure, cholesterol-lowering and any other medications just as the doctor orders. The American Heart Association also recommends taking an aspirin a day for women who are at a higher risk than others. This should be discussed a doctor before self-medicating.

Heart disease does not discriminate and can strike at any age. So if a woman has concerns about her heart health, it is important to address these with her physician as soon as possible. Women need to start taking steps to reduce their risk of heart disease today.