



The Heart of the Matter

Raising Awareness About Women and Heart Disease

Chances are, you know that a pink ribbon symbolizes hope for the prevention and treatment of breast cancer. How about a little red dress?

A red dress pin—the trademark of national campaigns like *Go Red for Women* and *The Heart Truth*—is raising awareness about heart disease, which is the number one killer of women as well as men.

The truth is, you are almost 10 times more likely to die of a heart attack than breast cancer.

“Heart disease is the number one killer of women,” echoes Dr. Lori Mosca, director of preventive cardiology at New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Columbia University Medical Center in New York City. Every year, nearly 500,000 American women die of heart disease.

The Good News

The good news is that there are many things you can do to control and reduce your risk. “Much of this disease is preventable,” says Dr. Nanette K. Wenger, professor of medicine at Emory University School of Medicine and chief of cardiology at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta. Figuring out your risk and making lifestyle changes now, whatever your age, may help you avoid drug treatment and heart procedures later in life—and, as Dr. Wenger notes, even “has the potential to *prevent* heart disease.”

Know the Symptoms

Sometimes health care providers miss the true cause of a woman’s pain because she experiences sensations that are different or more complex than those of the typical man, says Dr. Wenger. The May 2004 issue of the *Harvard Women’s Health Watch* noted, “During a heart attack, women don’t experience the crushing chest pain that men do.” The American Heart Association’s *Special Report on Women and Heart Disease* adds that while some heart attacks are sudden and intense, most start slowly, with mild pain or discomfort. This report goes on to say that these symptoms could signal a heart attack:

- **Chest discomfort:** Most heart attacks involve discomfort in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes, or it goes away and comes back. It can feel like uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain.
- **Discomfort in other areas of the upper body:** Symptoms can include pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach.
- **Shortness of breath:** May occur with or without chest pain.
- **Other signs:** May include breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea or lightheadedness.

What should a woman do if she has these symptoms and isn’t sure if they are heart-related? If they’re mild and subside within a few minutes, call your doctor, Dr. Wenger advises; but if the symptoms are new, sudden and severe, call 911 immediately.

Control the Risks You Can ...

The majority of risk factors for heart disease are based on your lifestyle—which means there are a lot of simple things you can do to reduce your risk, including:

- **Don't smoke. If you do smoke, stop.** “Smoking triples a woman’s risk for a heart attack,” says Dr. Nieca Goldberg, chief of women’s cardiac care at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City and a spokesperson for the American Heart Association.
- **Exercise at least 30 minutes every day or most days of the week.** “We’re not talking about running marathons,” says Dr. Wenger. “You can get the recommended exercise by walking briskly for a half hour.”
- **Eat healthy foods that include lots of fruit and vegetables.** Choose a heart-healthy diet that includes a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, fish and poultry. This can help you maintain a healthy weight and has the potential to prevent the domino effect of obesity, high cholesterol and diabetes.
- **Have regular blood pressure and cholesterol screenings.** Knowing your blood pressure and cholesterol levels can help you to identify potential problems and take appropriate steps.

... and Understand the Ones You Can't

- **Family history.** If your family has a history of heart disease, then you may be at risk.
- **Race/ethnicity.** If you are an American Indian, African American, Mexican American or Native Hawaiian, you may be at greater risk than other women.
- **Age.** Risk increases after menopause, starting in your late 50s or in your 60s.

A Healthy Heart—By the Numbers

Your doctor can help determine if you are at low, intermediate or high risk for heart disease. Just as you would schedule annual Pap smears and mammograms, it’s important to regularly talk with your doctor about heart disease and make sure your numbers are within these healthy ranges:

- **Blood Pressure:** less than 120/80 mmHg
- **Total Cholesterol:** less than 200 mg/dL
- **HDL (“good” cholesterol):** above 50 mg/dL
- **LDL (“bad” cholesterol):**
 - *Low risk:* less than 160 mg/dL
 - *Moderate risk:* less than 130 mg/dL
 - *High risk:* below 100 mg/dL
 - *Very high risk:* below 70 mg/dL

- **Triglycerides:** below 150 mg/dL
- **Body Mass Index (BMI):** 18.5 -24.9 (this determines your body fat level based on height and weight)
- **Waist Circumference:** less than 35 inches (this measurement is important because extra pounds in the midsection pose heart health risks)

So the next time you see red, remember that it stands for power—*your* power to reduce your risk for heart disease and live a long, healthy life. And be sure to keep that little red dress pinned close to your heart. ●

Women & Heart Disease: Getting the Word Out

You may have seen recent news reports or magazine articles about women and heart disease. Through the leadership efforts of Dr. Bernadine Healy, cardiologist and former director of the National Institutes of Health; Dr. Sharonne Hayes, cardiologist and director of the Mayo Clinic Women’s Heart Clinic; and First Lady Laura Bush, ambassador for *The Heart Truth* campaign, heart disease in women is getting much-needed publicity. These people and organizations are helping to communicate what women can do to identify risk factors, recognize symptoms, and—most importantly—avoid the disease by developing a healthy lifestyle.

To find more information about what you can do to prevent heart disease, check out these Web sites:

Go Red for Women

American Heart Association
www.americanheart.org
(888) MY-HEART (694-3278)

The Heart Truth

National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute
www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/hearttruth

National Institutes of Health

www.health.nih.gov
Click on *Women’s Health*

Mayo Clinic Women’s Heart Clinic

www.mayoclinic.org/cardiovascular-rst/womensclinic.html