



The Heart Truth: Women And Heart Disease

Heart Disease and Women's Risk

Coronary heart disease is the most common form of heart disease. It develops over many years and is a disorder of the blood vessels of the heart. It can result in heart attack, disability, and death. A heart attack happens when an artery becomes blocked, preventing oxygen and nutrients from getting to the heart.

Usually referred to simply as "heart disease," coronary heart disease is one of various cardiovascular diseases, which are diseases of the heart and blood vessel system. Other cardiovascular diseases include stroke, high blood pressure, and rheumatic heart disease.

Many women fail to recognize the seriousness of heart disease. One reason may be the common misperception that heart disease can be "cured" with surgery. Bypass surgery and angioplasty can help restore blood and oxygen flow to the heart. However, blood vessels remain damaged, which means women are more likely to have a heart attack.

It is important to realize that heart disease is a lifelong condition—once you get it, you'll always have it. Once developed, heart disease can be managed, but it cannot be cured. Without lifestyle changes, such as not smoking, following a heart healthy eating plan, and being physically active, heart disease will likely steadily worsen. One in four women dies from heart disease.

Heart Disease Risk Factors

Why does your lifestyle matter? It affects many of the "risk factors" for heart disease. Risk factors are conditions or habits that increase the chances of developing a disease or having it worsen. There are two types of heart disease risk factors—those you can't change and those you can control. One risk factor that cannot be changed is a family history of early heart disease. Also, for women, age becomes a risk factor at 55. But many heart disease risk factors can be controlled by making changes in your lifestyle and, in some cases, by taking medication. The heart disease risk factors do not add their effects simply—they multiply them. Having more than one risk factor is especially serious. Women should talk to a health professional about their individual risks and how to lower them.

Information courtesy of *The Heart Truth*, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. For more information, visit www.hearttruth.gov.

Risk factors for heart disease are:

- Smoking
- High blood pressure
- High blood cholesterol
- Overweight/obesity
- Physical inactivity
- Diabetes
- Family history of early coronary heart disease
- Age (for women, 55 and older)

Women's Heart Disease Statistics

Women often do not take their risk of heart disease seriously—or personally. They fail to make the connection between the risk factors and their own chance of developing heart disease.

The Heart Truth is:

- Heart disease is the #1 killer of American women.
- Almost eight times more women die from heart disease than breast cancer, and more women die of heart disease than all forms of cancer combined.
- Women's heart disease risk starts to rise in middle age.
- About 3 million American women have had a heart attack.
- Two-thirds of American women who have had a heart attack don't make a full recovery.
- Sixty-four percent of American women who die suddenly of a heart attack had no prior symptoms.
- Americans can lower their risk of heart disease by as much as 82 percent just by leading a healthy lifestyle.
- Awareness of heart disease as the leading cause of death has increased from 30 percent in 1997 to 57 percent in 2006.
- Only 21 percent of women consider heart disease to be their own greatest health risk, an increase from 13 percent in 1997.