



Your Guide to a Heart-Healthy Life

Did you know the heart beats about 2.5 billion times over the average lifetime? That's 2.5 billion reasons to get info on how you can keep your heart healthy and protect yourself against cardiovascular disease.

Use this guide to learn essential tips and suggestions on living a heart-healthy lifestyle.



Across the world, heart disease and stroke are the leading causes of death. In the U.S. alone, heart disease kills about one in every five women. On top of that, about two-thirds of women who experienced sudden death from heart disease did not previously have symptoms. This may sound alarming, but the good news is, you have the power to protect and improve your heart health.

Start by educating yourself so you can adapt your lifestyle to prevent heart disease. This guide is a helpful resource to become more aware of the ways your habits could be impacting your heart.

What Is Heart Disease?

Heart disease is a general term for a variety of heart conditions. The most common form of heart disease is coronary artery disease. This occurs when the arteries that take blood to the heart harden and narrow as a result of plaque building up inside the arteries.

Plaque consists of substances like fat, cholesterol and other lipids.

When an artery is entirely blocked with plaque, oxygen and nutrients can't get through and a heart attack happens, which can cause permanent damage to the heart.

Can Heart Disease be “Cured”?

Some surgeries, like bypass or angioplasty, can help increase blood flow, but they do not “cure” the disease. Once you develop heart disease, you will have it for life.

How Does Heart Disease Affect Women?

Women are more likely to have a “silent” heart attack with no overt symptoms or symptoms that are harder to detect.

Even if the symptoms are noticeable, women often ignore them because, as primary caregivers, they believe they don't have time to be sick or feel bad.

For these reasons, heart disease can be a “silent killer” and often goes undiagnosed until an emergency. It is important for women to learn about heart disease and talk with other women about it to raise awareness.

Approximately 1 of 16 women over 20 years old have coronary artery disease and only about half of all women recognize that heart disease is the number one killer of women in the United States.



Heart Attack Symptoms

Chest pain is a common symptom of a heart attack, but you should also be aware that there are additional symptoms unrelated to chest pain that can be indicators of heart issues:

- Shortness of breath
- Pain or numbness in one or both arms or legs
- Neck, jaw or throat pain
- Pain in the upper back or abdomen
- Sweating
- Indigestion
- Nausea or vomiting
- Fatigue



Heart attack symptoms in women tend to be subtle and harder to detect as women tend to have blockages not just in the main arteries but also in the smaller ones. Women may also have more symptoms when resting or sleeping.

When a man has a heart episode, it's easier to perform medical intervention, such as bypass surgery or inserting a stent. But with women, the vessels are sometimes too small for this sort of intervention.

Because heart damage can occur subtly and over time for women, they need to talk to their doctors if they think they have any risk factors or previous signs of a heart attack.

If you think you are having a heart attack or experiencing symptoms, call 911 immediately to seek emergency medical help. Do not drive yourself to the hospital unless it is your only option.

Risk Factors

Some risk factors that relate specifically to women include high testosterone levels before menopause, increasing hypertension during menopause, stress and depression.

With every risk factor you have, your odds of developing heart disease increase. And although some factors cannot be changed, such as genetics, it is important to recognize the risk factors you can control.

Risk Factors You Can Control

- **Smoking** – Heart attacks are more common with smokers than with nonsmokers. If you smoke, now is a good time to talk to your doctor about steps you can take to quit.
- **Blood pressure** – Get your blood pressure checked regularly. Knowing your blood pressure numbers is the first step in keeping blood pressure under control. High blood pressure is a major risk factor for heart disease.
- **High cholesterol** – Learn about your cholesterol levels and discuss them with your doctor to make sure they are at healthy levels.
- **Your weight** – Maintain a healthy and consistent BMI.
- **Physical inactivity** – Exercising at least 30 minutes a day is recommended. A sedentary lifestyle is associated with heart disease risk.



- **Diabetes** – Speak with your doctor about whether or not you should be tested for diabetes. If you have diabetes or prediabetes, it creates a higher risk of blood clots and damage to coronary arteries, which also increases your risk of heart disease.
- **Drinking too much alcohol** – When it comes to alcohol, keep moderation in mind. That means an average of one drink a day for women.
- **Your diet** – A diet high in fat, salt, sugar or cholesterol can contribute to heart disease. While you should ultimately speak with your doctor about your specific dietary needs, we generally recommend sticking to healthy foods like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, dairy, beans and small amounts of animal protein. You should also pay attention to the amount of sodium you consume.

Risk Factors You Cannot Change

- **Age** – Heart disease can happen at any age; however, as you get older, your risk of damaged or narrowed arteries increases.
- **Family history** – Genes get passed through generations of a family. If you have family members with high blood pressure, heart disease or other related conditions, you may be at a higher risk of developing heart disease. This risk is often greater in women than in men.
- **Menopause** – For women, the risk of a heart attack increases when menopause starts. While menopause itself doesn't cause heart disease, it results in changes to your cholesterol and blood pressure that can affect the heart. High testosterone levels before menopause and increasing hypertension during menopause can also increase your risk of heart disease.
- **Pregnancy complications** – Conditions like preeclampsia and gestational diabetes during pregnancy can increase your risk of heart disease. These complications are a warning sign that a woman may already have underlying issues with blood vessel function.



What Can You Do to Reduce Your Risk of Heart Disease?

The great news is you have the power to take control and lower your risk of heart disease.

- 1. Learn about your risk factors.** Staying informed and aware of your health is important. This helps you work on lowering any high-risk areas.
- 2. Make heart-healthy changes in your diet.** Focus on eating foods rich in minerals, protein, whole grains and other nutrients.
- 3. Stay fit.** Exercise is one of the most effective ways to strengthen the heart. Try different physical activities to get the maximum benefit of complete fitness.
- 4. Lower your blood pressure.** You can lower your blood pressure without medication by losing extra weight, exercising, cutting back on sodium, reducing stress and monitoring your blood pressure.
- 5. Know your blood sugar.** Knowing if you have high blood sugar numbers allows you to take steps to lower them and prevent diabetes. High blood sugar can damage your blood vessels and organs over time.
- 6. Quit smoking.** Ditch the vapes and any other tobacco and nicotine products. You should also avoid secondhand smoke and vapor.
- 7. Keep the weight off.** Having extra pounds on your body can damage your heart muscle and function. Work to keep your weight at a healthy, steady number.
- 8. Manage stress levels.** When stress is constant, your body reacts poorly. Practice ways to combat stress and manage your reactions.
- 9. Know it is never too late—or too early—to protect your heart.** Take charge, and don't let your age stop you. Any prevention and lifestyle improvements you make now will help you in the long run.
- 10. Talk to your doctor.** Communicate honestly, and don't wait for them to ask questions. You are the owner of your health and health history. Bring a list of questions to ask your doctor so you don't forget anything.

