

Women's Heart Health

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Electronic Information Sources

Heart disease is a frightening ailment that has the potential to take over—or even take—a woman’s life. In fact, it is the number one killer of women worldwide. Heart disease claims the lives of hundreds of thousands of women each year, and it is increasing showing up in young women. Most women are not cognizant of the threat that the deadly disease poses, ignoring the risks and going on with their lives. Building awareness is a must today because prevention is the most potent defense against heart disorders.

As a young college woman, it is difficult to avoid many unhealthy behaviors. When grabbing a quick meal, staying up until the wee hours of the morning to study, or going to a bar with friends, most women are not thinking about the effects that their actions have on their hearts. “Obesity rates are soaring, women are still smoking, and they are stressed with so many extra duties. You couldn’t paint a bleaker forecast for an 18-year-old woman,” states Richard Collins, M.D. (4). Most women aren’t aware that their actions—or lack of action—are hurting their hearts. To be more accurate, most women don’t even think about their heart. It is crucial to spread knowledge about the disease to young women, so they can help themselves.

Cardiovascular disease has been the number one killer of women for 100 years. The disease claims the lives of 500,000 women each year, 65,000 more women than men, and the first sign of trouble in about 63 percent of sufferers is death (4). The disease takes many forms. The three most common are stroke, in which a clot affects the brain; atherosclerosis, in which plaque buildup narrows and thickens the arteries; and

arteriosclerosis, in which the arteries harden (4). All forms may dramatically harm a woman's quality of life if they affect her, and all can be deadly.

Risk factors are important to recognize. Most women can control or treat the problems that frequently lead to heart disease. High cholesterol can cause arteries to become clogged with plaque. The buildup may cause clots in the arteries that block blood flow. If blood is blocked from the heart, it causes a heart attack, and if blood is blocked from the brain, it causes a stroke. High blood pressure, hypertension, causes the heart to go into overdrive, making it more prone to injury. The risk of heart attack, stroke, congestive heart failure, and atherosclerosis is greatly increases in the presence of high blood pressure. Women with diabetes have from two to four times the risk of heart disease as do healthy women. Diabetes may be accompanied by high cholesterol and blood pressure, so it should be treated carefully (1).

Other, more obvious, risk factors include smoking, physical inactivity, and obesity. Smoking greatly increases your risk of illness and death from heart attack, stroke, and other diseases. The risk of heart disease and stroke drops as soon as a woman stops smoking. It is cut in half after one year without smoking and declines perpetually after that. Regular, moderate to vigorous physical activity improves cardiovascular fitness and helps reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke. Exercise fights high cholesterol, diabetes, obesity, and lowers blood pressure. A minimum of 30 minutes of physical activity on most days of the week is recommended by the American Heart Association to condition the heart. Body fat increases the risk for health problems.

Women with excess body fat are at a higher risk of heart disease. A healthy diet and exercise program should be followed to target the problem (1).

Heart disease affects numerous women and the people who love and cherish women with the disease. Many organizations have chosen to participate in heart health programs to spread the knowledge about women's heart health. There are many ways to become involved and to learn more. The Heart Truth Road Show is traveling to Philadelphia, Chicago, San Diego, Dallas, and Miami from March to May 2004 to educate women about heart health. The Road Show will provide risk factor screening and important information about cardiovascular disease (5). The First Lady helped the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute launch the Red Dress Project at the conclusion of Fashion Week in New York. The project is intended to inform and featured 19 red dress designers from Bill Blass to Vera Wang. Their slogan is: "Heart disease doesn't care what you wear (3)."

The Red Dress Pin is available for purchase from the American Heart Association. It should be worn like the pink ribbon for breast cancer and the red ribbon for AIDS, to show that you care and to spread awareness for the disease. Women can support research and education for the disease by purchasing many different products. The Shania Red Lipstick, by benefit, can be purchased at Sephora. O·P·I is selling bottles of "Heart to Heart with OPI" nail polish. Portions of the sales of these products go to the American Heart Association. St. John Boutique, Walgreens, Swarovski, Pantene, and Bayer participate in similar programs.

Ideally, by appearing on a website, this project will inform young women about the health risks they face. By taking the information to heart, they may alter their current lifestyle habits to become healthier and happier women. I would encourage young women to take care of their bodies and to become involved in the fight to prevent heart disease.

- (1) American Heart Association. 2004. American Heart Association. 20 March 2004
<<http://www.americanheart.org/>>.

An encyclopedia of terms used in describing heart disease and strokes is available for educational purposes. Details are given for various forms of heart disease and healthy lifestyle suggestions are made. The “Go Red for Women” campaign is detailed on the site and red dress pins can be ordered.

- (2) Bayer Aspirin. 23 March 2004. <<http://www.bayeraspirin.com/>>.

The site details what happens during a heart attack and a stroke and has a special section devoted to women’s heart health. A quiz is available to measure risk levels for cardiovascular disease and information about using aspirin for the prevention of heart problems is provided.

- (3) “Devil in a Red Dress? First Lady Unveils Red Dress as Symbol that Heart Disease Kills.” ABCNEWS.com. 14 February 2004. 23 March 2004
<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/GMA/HealthyWoman/GMA030214Red_dress_campaign.html>.

Laura Bush and 19 fashion designers revealed the Red Dress Collection 2004 at the close of Fashion Week in New York. The collection was intended to draw attention to heart disease, the top killer of women. Their slogan is: “Heart disease doesn’t care what you wear.” Suggestions for lifestyle changes and healthy heart tips are included in the article.

- (4) Glamour. 2004. 19 March 2004 <<http://www.glamour.com/>>.

Glamour has devoted itself to women’s heart health. The magazine publishes at least one article focused on cardiovascular health each month. The articles can be accessed through their website and additional links and resources are available. Learn how to purchase benefit’s Shania Red Lipstick. All proceeds from the sales of the sheer lipstick go to the American Heart Association.

- (5) The Heart Truth. National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. 20 March 2004
<<http://www.hearttruth.com/>>.

The Heart Truth is a national awareness campaign for women about heart disease. The campaign is supported by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute and strives to educate women about the heart health risks they face at any age. Heart Truth events are featured, as well as health tips and stories from women with heart disease.

- (6) Kollauf, Cynthia R. and Christine L. Miller. "Evolution of information on women and heart disease 1957-2000: A review of archival records and secular literature." Heart & Lung: The Journal of Acute and Critical Care 31.4 (July 2002): 253-261.

This article studies the evolution of information available to women about heart disease. Women's symptoms were not focused on until the 1980s, during an influx of information on women's health and a dramatic change in their social roles. Prior to that time, articles taught women how to take care of their husbands' hearts. Now, even with additional information, still more is needed to educate women about this deadly disease.

- (7) MayoClinic.com. 2004. Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. 20 March 2004 <<http://www.mayoclinic.com/>>.

This site offers a plethora of information to women wanting to learn about their hearts. Descriptions of heart problems, quizzes, diet and exercise plans, and even a slide show are thorough instructional tools that the site provides access to.

- (8) Whitlock, Evelyn P. and Selvi B. Williams. "The Primary Prevention of Heart Disease in Women through Health Behavior Change Promotion in Primary Care." Women's Health Issues 13.4 (July-August 2003): 122-141.

This article focuses on health and prevention methods for women. It recommends that tobacco use be stopped, physical activity be increased, and a healthy approach to dietary needs be taken up. Cardiovascular disease should be decreased through primary care intervention.

- (9) WomenHeart. 2003. 22 March 2004 <<http://www.womenheart.org/>>.

WomenHeart is a national patient advocacy organization founded by women with heart disease. It is dedicated to reducing death and disability among women living with the disease. The site has resources for finding treatment hospitals, research updates, and prescription drug savings. Fitness and wellness issues are focused on and information about heart disease is plentiful. Support groups are also available through the site.

- (10) Women's Heart Foundation. May 2003. Women's Heart Foundation. 22 March 2004. <<http://www.womensheart.org/>>.

This site delves into the benefits that exercise and proper nutrition carry with them. Special diets are outlined and relaxation methods are described and praised as part of the treatment and prevention process. Heart health information is in heavy supply and is supplemented by a quiz and health library.