

Health

July 22, 2007

Women should be concerned with preventing cardiovascular disease

Cardiovascular disease - the No. 1 cause of death in the United States - claims the lives of almost 500,000 women each year. That's nearly one death every minute. The lifetime risk of dying of cardiovascular disease is nearly one in three for women. Because heart disease can often be prevented, the American Heart Association and 11 other leading national health organizations came together to develop comprehensive guidelines for heart disease prevention in women. Issued in February, the guidelines include expanded recommendations on lifestyle factors, and more in-depth recommendations on drug treatments for blood pressure and cholesterol control, hormone and aspirin therapy and antioxidant and folic acid supplements.

The following lifestyle interventions were given strong priority for all women, not only because of their potential to reduce existing cardiovascular disease, but also because heart-healthy lifestyles may prevent major risk factors from developing:

- 1. Quit smoking and avoid environmental smoke:** Besides causing cancer and other diseases, many of the chemicals in cigarette smoke damage the walls of the vessels, causing a decrease in the ability of the small blood vessels to relax and an increase in blood pressure.
- 2. Control your weight:** In addition to making existing high blood pressure worse, being overweight can contribute to the development of diabetes and kidney damage, further worsening high blood pressure. Keep your body mass index (BMI) between 18.5 and 24.9 and your waist circumference to less than 35 inches.
- 3. Watch salt intake:** Salt can make high blood pressure worse, and too much salt can damage your heart. Reduce salt intake to less than 2400 mg. a day, about 1 teaspoon (less if prescribed by your physician).
- 4. Decrease bad fats in your diet:** Unsaturated fats and trans fats have a negative effect on both your heart and your blood vessels. Limit saturated fat to less than 7 percent of your daily calories and cholesterol intake to less than 300 mg.
- 5. Eat oily fish at least twice a week for the Omega-3 fatty acids**
- 6. Exercise:** Physical activity recommendations for women who need to lose weight or sustain weight loss have been increased to 60-90 minutes of moderate intensity activity on most, and preferably all, days of the week. An example of a moderate intensity activity is brisk walking at 15-20 minutes per mile.
- 7. Eat a heart-healthy diet:** Include fruits, vegetables, grains, low-fat or nonfat dairy products, fish, legumes and sources of protein low in saturated fat (such as, poultry, lean meats and plant sources) in your diet.
- 8. Cholesterol levels are important for women to know:** Total cholesterol optimally should be less than 200 milligrams per deciliter; low density lipoprotein (bad cholesterol), less than 100 mg/dL; high density lipoprotein (good cholesterol), more than 50 mg/dL; and triglycerides (a type of fat in the blood), less than 150 mg/dL.
- 9. Stress and depression:** Studies show your body's physiological reaction to high levels of sustained stress - increased blood pressure, an outpouring of adrenaline and other changes - makes you more susceptible to serious disorders like heart disease. Depression, more likely suffered by women, is also dangerous to the heart in both women and men. Find ways to reduce stress in your life and talk to a counselor or clergy if you are depressed.

What are the signs of a heart attack?

Not everyone has all of the warning signs of a heart attack. And, sometimes these signs can go away and come back.

Symptoms of a heart attack include:

- Pain or discomfort in the center of the chest
- Pain or discomfort in other areas of the upper body, including the arms, back, neck, jaw or stomach
- Other symptoms, such as shortness of breath (feeling like you can't get enough air), breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea (feeling sick to your stomach) or feeling faint or woozy

Some women have more vague symptoms such as:

- Unusual tiredness
- Trouble sleeping
- Problems breathing
- Indigestion (upset stomach)
- Anxiety (unusual nervousness, feelings of impending doom, feeling uneasy or worried)
- Fluttering - rapid heartbeats, palpitations.
- Feeling of heaviness, such as pressure-like chest pain between the breasts that may radiate to the left arm or shoulder

As with men, women's most common heart attack symptom is chest pain or discomfort. But women are somewhat more likely than men to experience some of the other common symptoms, particularly shortness of breath, nausea/vomiting and back or jaw pain. Remember, being aware of personal risk and treatment options can empower you to live a long and healthy life. Your physician can help you make lifestyle changes and better select the right medications to help you avoid or treat heart disease. So, don't be afraid to know more about yourself and heart disease, and if you are worried about symptoms, even if you're not sure it's a heart attack, have it checked out. Minutes matter! Fast action can save lives - maybe your own.