

The Heart Truth - Women and Heart Disease

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February is National Heart Month, and on Friday, Feb. 6, St. Mary's Hospital will celebrate Go Red Day in an effort to create awareness about women and heart disease. The Heart Truth is a national awareness campaign for women about heart disease.

The Heart Truth is that heart disease is the No. 1 killer of American women. The Heart Truth is that women don't take their risk of heart disease seriously or personally. The Heart Truth is that most women fail to make the connection between risk factors and their personal risk of developing heart disease.

The Heart Truth is that signs/symptoms of heart disease in women don't mimic the classic symptoms you always read about. Most women experience very different symptoms from the classic symptoms of chest pain, radiation of pain down the left arm, indigestion and sweating. The Heart Truth is that the most important sign of heart disease in women is feeling really tired — even after a good night's rest. Other signs can include trouble sleeping, nausea, chest aching and pain in the back between the shoulders. Pain in the chest that spreads to the jaw, neck and shoulders is often typical. Women often ignore symptoms because they assume daily stress and an overwhelming lifestyle is the culprit!

So, how do we lower our risk of heart disease? Most women know about the typical efforts of staying active, losing weight and decreasing stress. Here are other helpful hints of which you might not be aware:

- Ask your doctor about C-reactive protein and homocysteine levels, valuable predictors of cardiovascular risk in otherwise healthy individuals.
- Know your numbers — every woman should know their blood pressure, normal weight and cholesterol levels. Additionally, every woman should know the breakdown of good cholesterol (HDL) and bad cholesterol (LDL).
- Know your triglyceride levels — triglycerides are artery clogging sticky fats that are now being used to detect risk for heart disease as well as cholesterol.
- Decrease your sodium intake. The average American consumes 6,000 to 8,000 mg of sodium per day. Healthy recommendations include limiting daily sodium intake to 2,400 mg per day if you have a healthy heart. The recommendation for those with heart disease (including high blood pressure) is less than 2,000 mg per day.
- Increase your intake of fiber and whole grains and consider adding ground flaxseed to your daily diet.
- Don't smoke — nicotine in cigarettes constricts your blood vessels and causes your heart to work harder. If you take birth control pills and smoke, you are at an increased risk for blood clots.

The Heart Truth starts with YOU. Talk to your doctor, find out your risk and take action today to lower it.

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