

## The Heart Truth



<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/educational/hearttruth/lower-risk/index.htm>

When you hear the term “heart disease,” you may think, “That’s a man’s disease” or “Not my problem.” But here is *The Heart Truth*: one in four women in the United States dies of heart disease, while one in 30 dies of breast cancer. If you’ve got a heart, heart disease could be your problem.

### What is Heart Disease?

Coronary heart disease - often simply called heart disease - is the main form of heart disease. It is a disorder of the blood vessels of the heart that can lead to heart attack. A heart attack happens when an artery becomes blocked, preventing oxygen and nutrients from getting to the heart. Heart disease is one of several cardiovascular diseases, which are diseases of the heart and blood vessel system. Other cardiovascular diseases include stroke, high blood pressure, angina (chest pain), and rheumatic heart disease.

One reason some women aren't too concerned about heart disease is that they think it can be "cured" with surgery or medication. This is a myth. Heart disease is a lifelong condition—once you get it, you'll always have it. True, procedures such as bypass surgery and angioplasty can help blood and oxygen flow to the heart more easily. But the arteries remain damaged, which means you are more likely to have a heart attack. What's more, the condition of your blood vessels will steadily worsen unless you make changes in your daily habits. Many women die of complications from heart disease, or become permanently disabled. That's why it is so vital to take action to prevent and control this disease.

### What Are the Risk Factors for Heart Disease?

An astonishing 80 percent of women ages 40 to 60 have one or more risk factor for heart disease. Having one or more risk factors dramatically increases a woman's chance of developing heart disease because risk factors tend to worsen each other's effects. In fact, according to research compiled by the NHLBI, having just one risk factor doubles your chance of developing heart disease.

Whatever a woman's age, she needs to take action to protect her heart health. Heart disease can begin early, even in the teen years, and women in their 20s and 30s need to take action to reduce their risk of developing heart disease. Yet among U.S. women ages 18 and older, 17.3 percent are current smokers, 51.6 are overweight (BMI 25 or greater), 27 percent have hypertension, 35 percent have high cholesterol, and 53 percent do not meet physical activity recommendations. African American and Hispanic women, in particular, have higher rates of some risk factors for heart disease and are disproportionately affected by the disease compared to white women. More than 80

percent of midlife African American women are overweight or obese, 52 percent have hypertension, and 14 percent have been diagnosed with diabetes. Some 83 percent of midlife Hispanic women are overweight or obese, and more than 10 percent have been diagnosed with diabetes.

Risk factors are conditions or habits that make a person more likely to develop a disease. They can also increase the chances that an existing disease will get worse. Important risk factors for heart disease that you can do something about are:

- High blood pressure
- High blood cholesterol
- Diabetes
- Smoking
- Being overweight
- Being physically inactive
- Having a family history of early heart disease
- Age (55 or older for women)



Some risk factors, such as age and family history of early heart disease, can't be changed. For women, age becomes a risk factor at 55. After menopause, women are more apt to get heart disease, in part because their body's production of estrogen drops. Women who have gone through early menopause, either naturally or because they have had a hysterectomy, are twice as likely to develop heart disease as women of the same age who have not yet gone through menopause. Another reason for the increasing risk is that middle age is a time when women tend to develop risk factors for heart disease. Family history of early heart disease is another risk factor that can't be changed. If your father or brother had a heart attack before age 55, or if your mother or sister had one before age 65, you are more likely to get heart disease yourself.

While certain risk factors cannot be changed, it is important to realize that you do have control over many others. Regardless of your age, background, or health status, you can lower your risk of heart disease-and it doesn't have to be complicated. Protecting your heart can be as simple as taking a brisk walk, whipping up a good vegetable soup, or getting the support you need to maintain a healthy weight.

You can make the changes gradually, one at a time. But making them is very important. Other women may wonder: If I have just one risk factor for heart disease-say, I'm overweight or I have high blood cholesterol-aren't I more or less "safe"? Absolutely not. Each risk factor greatly increases a woman's chance of developing heart disease. But having more than one risk factor is especially serious, because risk factors tend to "gang up" and worsen each other's effects. So, the message is clear: Every woman needs to take her heart disease risk seriously-and take action now to reduce that risk.

## How Do I Find Out if I Am at Risk for Heart Disease?

Some women believe that doing just one healthy thing will take care of all their heart disease risk. For example, they may think that if they walk or swim regularly, they can still smoke and stay fairly healthy. Wrong! To protect your heart, it is vital to make changes that address each risk factor you have.

The first step toward heart health is becoming aware of your own personal risk for heart disease. Some risks, such as smoking cigarettes, are obvious: every woman knows whether or not she smokes. But other risk factors, such as high blood pressure or high blood cholesterol, generally don't have obvious signs or symptoms. So you'll need to gather some information to create your personal "heart profile."

[Find out your risk for a heart attack.](#)

### You and Your Doctor: A Heart Healthy Partnership

A crucial step in determining your risk is to see your doctor for a thorough checkup. Your doctor can be an important partner in helping you set and reach goals for heart health. But don't wait for your doctor to mention heart disease or its risk factors. Many doctors don't routinely bring up the subject with women patients. Here are some tips for establishing good, clear communication between you and your doctor:



*Speak up.* Tell your doctor you want to keep your heart healthy and would like help in achieving that goal. Ask questions about your chances of developing heart disease and how you can lower your risk. (See "[Questions To Ask Your Doctor](#)" on page 15 of [The Healthy Heart Handbook for Women](#).) Also ask for tests that will determine your personal risk factors. (See "[Check It Out](#)" (PDF, 46K) on page 16 of *The Healthy Heart Handbook for Women*.)

*Keep tabs on treatment.* If you already are being treated for heart disease or heart disease risk factors, ask your doctor to review your treatment plan with you. Ask: Is what I'm doing in line with the latest recommendations? Are my treatments working? Are my risk factors under control? If your doctor recommends a medical procedure, ask about its benefits and risks. Find out if you will need to be hospitalized and for how long, and what to expect during the recovery period.

*Be open.* When your doctor asks you questions, answer as honestly and fully as you can. While certain topics may seem quite personal, discussing them openly can help your doctor find out your chances of developing heart disease. It can also help your doctor work with you to reduce your risk. If you already have heart disease, briefly

describe each of your symptoms. Include when each symptom started, how often it happens, and whether it has been getting worse.

*Keep it simple.* If you don't understand something your doctor says, ask for an explanation in simple language. Be especially sure you understand how to take any medication you are given. If you are worried about understanding what the doctor says, or if you have trouble hearing, bring a friend or relative with you to your appointment. You may want to ask that person to write down the doctor's instructions for you.

A damaged heart can damage your life by interfering with enjoyable activities and even your ability to do simple things, such as taking a walk or climbing steps. Heart disease cannot be “cured.” It is a lifelong condition—once you get it, you’ll always have it.

Fortunately, it’s a problem you can do something about. Find out your risk for heart disease and take steps to prevent and control it. Talk to your physician to get more answers. Start taking action today to protect your heart. By doing just 4 things—eating right, being physically active, not smoking, and keeping a healthy weight—you can reduce your risk of heart disease by as much as 82 percent. Visit *The Heart Truth's* [tools](#) and [resources](#).

### Learn More About Heart Disease

- [What should I know about menopausal hormone therapy and heart disease?](#)

### Additional Resources

#### [HeartHealthyWomen.org](#)

A gender-based Web site on the diagnosis and treatment of heart disease in women, a joint project of WomenHeart: the National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease and the Cardiovascular Research Foundation, supported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office on Women's Health.

#### [National Women's Health Information Center](#)

Office on Women's Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.  
WomenHeart: the National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease  
[www.womenheart.org](http://www.womenheart.org)

#### [The Heart Truth Professional Education Website](#)

Developed by the HHS Office on Women's Health and NHLBI provides information for clinicians and educators about the prevention of heart disease in women.

