

# Heart Disease and Women

Did you know that heart disease is the leading killer of females in America? Not only does heart disease kill more women than men each year, but females who survive a cardiac event fare much worse than their male counterparts. Yet many women fail to recognize the toll that cardiovascular disease (CVD) can take on their bodies, and thus fail to do what is necessary to reduce the risk of getting this largely preventable disease.

What is CVD? What puts women at risk and how can you lower your risk? Natalie Digate Muth, MPH, RD, CSCS, a registered dietitian and medical student at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, discusses these topics below.

## What Is CVD?

The term **cardiovascular disease** refers to any disease of the heart and its blood vessels. Generally speaking, CVD is an umbrella term that encompasses all conditions affecting the heart muscle itself, the valves of the heart and/or the blood vessels that supply the heart (i.e., coronary arteries).

**Vessel disease, or vascular disease**, includes diseases such as hypertension (high blood pressure) and **atherosclerosis** (hardening of the arteries caused by the formation of plaque deposits within the arterial wall).

Atherosclerosis of the coronary arteries is the main culprit behind chest pain

(**angina**) and heart attack (**myocardial infarction**). Although the condition is not usually dangerous until middle age and beyond, atherosclerosis typically begins to develop in childhood.

## Educate Yourself About Your Risk

Minimize your CVD risk by learning about risk factors such as:

- elevated total and LDL (low-density lipoprotein) cholesterol levels
- low HDL (high-density lipoprotein) cholesterol levels
- obesity
- smoking
- hypertension
- sedentary lifestyle
- poor diet
- stress and depression
- family history of premature CVD
- middle age
- diabetes

The more risk factors that are present, the higher the risk of atherosclerosis and subsequent heart attack or stroke.

## Talk to Your Doctor

A simple preventive health checkup and a blood draw in the lab can arm you with the information needed to determine your specific risk. Ask your doctor questions such as:

- What is my risk for heart disease?
- What is my blood pressure reading? What does this reading mean for me, and what do I need to do about it?
- What are my cholesterol numbers? What do these numbers mean for me, and what do I need to do about them?
- How can I tell if I'm having a heart attack? What are the typical signs in a woman compared with a man? ■



## improve your risk

Regardless of your risk, you should follow these guidelines, with women at highest risk needing to make changes urgently:

**Quit Smoking.** Smoking is responsible for multiple serious diseases. A lean and physically fit, fruit- and vegetable-loving woman who smokes is not immune from CVD.

**Aim for a Healthy Body Mass Index (BMI).** A BMI of between 18.5 and 24.9 is considered optimal (check out [www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi](http://www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi) to determine your BMI). While this BMI range may be out of the question for you, even a small weight loss can reduce CVD disease risk.

**Engage in Regular Exercise.** Experts recommend getting at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity daily. If you need to lose weight, up that time to 60–90 minutes daily.

**Eat a Healthy Diet.** Aim for a regular diet rich in fruits and vegetables, whole grains and high-fiber foods. Consume fish (in particular oily fish like salmon, trout and tuna) at least twice per week; limit saturated fat, cholesterol, alcohol and sodium intake. Avoid any foods that contain trans fats. The MyPyramid website ([www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov)) offers many helpful resources.

**Seek Help for Depression.** Depression wreaks havoc on the heart and arteries. If your depression doesn't improve with a regular exercise program, seek professional help not only for your mental health, but also to protect your heart.

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