



FACT SHEET — *Cardiovascular Disease*

Cardiovascular, or heart disease, occurs when there is a blockage in the coronary arteries, commonly a result of cholesterol accumulation. This condition can lead to disease of the heart or blood vessels. It includes heart disease, heart attack, stroke and atherosclerosis, the process by which fatty substances build up inside the walls of blood vessels.

Risk Factors for Cardiovascular Disease

- ◆ **Age 55 or older** — Post-menopausal women are more likely to develop the disease than younger women. Doctors believe this is because until menopause, women are protected from the risk of heart attack by the hormone estrogen.
- ◆ **Cigarette smoking** — Women who smoke are two to six times more likely to suffer a heart attack than non-smoking women because cigarette smoking puts an added strain on the heart by causing the blood vessels to constrict. Smoking also raises the risk of blood clots.
- ◆ **High blood pressure** — Half of all women over the age of 55 suffer from high blood pressure. Women with high blood pressure are at risk for developing cardiovascular disease.
- ◆ **High blood cholesterol** — Blood cholesterol-levels among women tend to rise after 40 and increase until around age 60. The higher a woman's cholesterol level is, the more likely that fats and cholesterol will build up in her artery walls.
- ◆ **Excess weight** — Although a healthy weight varies from woman to woman, being overweight contributes to the risk factors associated with cardiovascular disease, such as high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, and the most common form of diabetes, as well as contributing to cardiovascular disease itself.
- ◆ **Diabetes** — This disorder occurs as a result of high blood sugar. After age 45, about two times as many women as men develop this disease. The risk of heart attack in diabetic women is more than double that of non-diabetic women of the same age.
- ◆ **Birth Control Pills** — Women who use high-dose oral contraceptives are at higher risk for a heart attack or stroke because of the development of blood clots.

Diagnosing Coronary Heart Disease

There are two tests to diagnose coronary heart disease: an electrocardiogram (EKG), and a stress test. An EKG makes a record of the heart's activity as it beats. This can show any irregularities, such as problems with blood flow and abnormal heartbeats. A stress test is performed by having a patient run on a treadmill, for instance, while the EKG is recorded.

Symptoms of Coronary Heart Disease

Angina, or chest pain, is one of the first signs of the disease. This is caused by a lack of blood flow to the heart. Patients may also experience shortness of breath or indigestion. Women are encouraged to communicate openly with their doctor about any symptoms they may have. If treated, the outcome is often positive, but if it is not treated, the symptoms may become worse and even lead to a heart attack.

Post-menopausal Women and the Risk of Stroke

Another form of cardiovascular disease is stroke. The warning signs of a stroke are sudden blurred vision or decreased vision in one or both eyes, difficulty speaking or



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understanding words or simple sentences, sudden numbness or weakness in the face, arm or leg (especially on one side of the body), sudden inability to move part of the body (paralysis), or loss of balance or coordination coupled with another warning sign.

A stroke is caused by a blood vessel that bursts in the brain or a blood clot that lodges in a blood vessel in the brain. The result of a stroke includes memory loss, weakness in part of the body, inability to move part of the body (paralysis), change in personality, confusion or poor judgment.

Treatment of Cardiovascular Disease

Findings presented at the 10th International Congress of Endocrinology provided some insight on the benefits of estrogen and progesterone in protecting women against cardiovascular disease. Scientists from the University of California, Irvine, and the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center at Long Beach presented on how estrogen or progesterone inhibits the growth of vascular smooth muscle cells (VSMC). VSMC growth is an early event in the development of cardiovascular disease and up until now it was questionable whether or not progesterone helped inhibit the onset of heart disease. The National Women's Health Report suggests several things to reduce the chance of cardiovascular disease:

- quitting smoking;
- reducing dietary fat and cholesterol;
- controlling blood pressure;
- exercising; and/or
- maintaining a healthy weight.

Tips for Preventing Heart Disease

Quit smoking

A woman doubles her chances of having a heart attack when she smokes. Smoking can speed up the process of atherosclerosis, which occurs when fatty substances build up inside walls of blood vessels. When a woman quits smoking, the risk to the heart drops greatly. Even if a patient has had a heart attack, she will benefit from quitting by reducing the risk of a second attack. For some women, the risk of having a second heart attack is cut by 50 percent after quitting smoking.

Exercise

According to the National Women's Health Resource Center, nearly 6 out of 10 women in the United States are sedentary, or inactive. Regular

physical activity helps reduce cholesterol levels and weight. Cardiovascular disease can be prevented by exercising for 30 minutes a day three to four times weekly.

Maintain a Healthy Weight and Lower Blood Cholesterol

When a woman carries excess weight, the chance of developing diabetes and other weight-related health problems increase. A woman can lower weight and reduce her blood cholesterol level by eating foods that are lower in total fat and saturated fat which raises cholesterol levels.

Lower High Blood Pressure

High blood pressure, or hypertension, has no cure but can be controlled. High blood pressure makes the heart work harder and when not controlled, can lead to heart disease. Many American women over age 60 have high blood pressure and almost 80 percent of African American women over the age of 60 suffer from it. However, high blood pressure can be prevented and does not have to increase with age. To reduce high blood pressure, a woman can lose weight, become more active, eat foods low in salt and sodium, and limit alcohol intake. Hormone replacement therapy can also improve blood cholesterol.

Drink Alcohol in Moderation

Even though alcohol is not a direct risk factor of heart disease, drinking in abundance increases your risk of high blood pressure, which in turn increases the risk of heart disease. The "Dietary Guidelines for Americans" recommend that women should not have more than one drink a day. A drink is considered 1.5 ounces of whiskey, 5 ounces of wine or 12 ounces of beer.

The American Osteopathic Association (AOA) urges women to contact their osteopathic family physician for advice on preserving good health for an active lifestyle. Osteopathic physicians (D.O.s), physicians treating people, not just symptoms, are especially well qualified to assist in preventive healthcare since they are fully trained licensed physicians who have additional training that focuses on the body's structure and function, and its ability to heal itself. For more information visit the AOA's Web site at www.aoa-net.org.