

Wear Red on February 7, 2014!

By

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American Heart Month is celebrated in February of every year. Did you know that more women die of heart disease than all forms of cancer combined? Research shows only 20 percent of women identify heart disease as the greatest health problem facing women today and don't take their risk of heart disease seriously—or personally. One in four women will die of heart disease. It's a lifelong condition that can't be cured, but it can be prevented.

Fortunately, there are many risk factors for heart disease that can be treated or controlled, such as smoking, physical inactivity, obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes. Other risks that cannot be controlled include:

- **Age.** Most women with heart disease are age 55 and older. Women have one additional risk factor that men don't—estrogen production. Estrogen is a hormone that naturally occurs in a woman's body that helps protect the heart. However, when a woman reaches menopause—typically around age 51—the body produces less of this hormone. This can contribute to high cholesterol, high blood pressure and weight gain. Fortunately, these conditions can be managed.
- **Heredity.** A person whose family member has heart disease has a higher-than-average risk.
- **Ethnicity.** African Americans are more likely to get heart disease. This is partly due to the higher rates of high blood pressure, obesity and diabetes in this group.

Making small health and lifestyle changes may help reduce your risk of heart disease. The following tips, as well as working closely with your doctor, can help you keep your heart healthy and strong:

- **Maintain healthy cholesterol levels.** Be sure to get regular cholesterol screenings.
- **Monitor your blood pressure.** High blood pressure increases the heart's workload. Check your blood pressure regularly and aim for a reading of 120/80 or less.
- **Control your diabetes.** If you have diabetes, work with your doctor to help manage this condition.
- **Don't smoke.** A smoker's risk of developing coronary artery disease is two to four times greater than a nonsmoker's. Within three years of quitting smoking, your risk drops to that of a nonsmoker.

- **Exercise.** Physical activity can help control cholesterol, diabetes, obesity and blood pressure. It's recommended that adults get two hours and 30 minutes a week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity or one hour and 15 minutes a week of vigorous-intensity aerobic activity, or a mix of the two. You should also include strength-training exercises on two or more days of the week. Be sure to check with your doctor before starting any exercise program.
- **Eat healthfully.** Include plenty of whole grains, fruits and vegetables. Avoid saturated and trans fats and sugar. The American Heart Association recommends that you try to eat fish twice a week. Aim for less than 1,500 milligrams of sodium daily. If you drink, consume no more than one alcoholic beverage a day.
- **Keep a healthy weight.** Being 20 percent or more overweight may cause high cholesterol, blood pressure, diabetes and stroke. Exercise and eating healthfully can help you maintain or achieve a healthy weight.
- **Work closely with your doctor if you're already at high risk.** If your doctor considers you to be at high risk, talk with him or her about special preventive strategies.

Remember that the more risk factors you can keep under control, the less likely you are to have a future heart attack. No matter what your age—whether in your 20's or 60's—you can take matters into your own hands to help reduce your risk of heart disease. It's never too late to live heart-healthy. Why not start now? For more information go to www.goredforwomen.org.