



## FACT SHEET FOR WOMEN

When you hear the term “heart disease,” what is your first reaction? Like many women, you may think, “That’s a man’s disease.” But here’s *The Heart Truth*: Heart disease is the # 1 killer of women in the United States. It is also a leading cause of disability among women. If you’ve got a heart, heart disease could be your problem.

The good news: Heart disease is a problem you can do something about. This fact sheet will help you find out your personal risk of heart disease. Then, it will show you how you can take steps to improve your heart health and reduce your chances of developing heart disease.

### WHAT IS HEART DISEASE?

Coronary heart disease is the most common form of heart disease. Usually referred to simply as “heart disease,” it is a disorder of the blood vessels of the heart that can lead to a heart attack. A heart attack happens when an artery becomes blocked, preventing oxygen and nutrients from getting to the heart.

It is important to realize that heart disease is a lifelong condition – once you get it, you’ll always have it. What’s more, the condition of your blood vessels will steadily worsen unless you make changes in your daily habits. That’s why it is so vital to take action now to prevent this disease.

### Risk Factors for Heart Disease

Why does your lifestyle matter? It affects many of the “risk factors” for heart disease. Risk factors are conditions or habits that increase the chances of developing a disease or having it worsen. There are two types of heart disease risk factors – those you can’t change and those you can control. One risk factor that cannot be changed is a family history of early heart disease. Also, for women, age becomes a risk factor at 55. That’s because, after menopause, women are more apt to get heart disease. In part, this occurs because a woman’s production of estrogen drops. Also, middle age is a time when women tend to develop other risk factors for heart disease.

But many heart disease risk factors can be controlled by making changes in your lifestyle and, in some cases, by taking medication. (For more on how to reduce risk factors, see “Taking Action.”) Risk factors that you can control include:

**Smoking.** Cigarette smoking greatly increases the risk of heart attack and stroke, as well as lung cancer and other serious diseases. There is simply no safe way to smoke. But the rewards of quitting are enormous. Just one year after you stop smoking, your heart disease risk will drop by more than half.

**High Blood Pressure.** High blood pressure can lead to heart disease, stroke, congestive heart failure, and kidney disease. Usually, blood pressure is expressed as two numbers, such as 120/ 80 mmHg (millimeters of mercury). Blood pressure is considered “high” when it is 140/90 or above. But even prehypertension (120-139 over 80-89) raises your risk of heart disease.

**High Blood Cholesterol.** Cholesterol travels in the blood in packages called lipoproteins. Low-density lipoprotein (LDL) is often called “bad” cholesterol because too much LDL in your blood can lead to blockages in the arteries – and a possible heart attack. The higher your LDL number, the higher your risk of heart disease. (An LDL level of 160\* or above is high; less than 100 is optimal.) Another type of cholesterol is high density lipoprotein (HDL), also known as “good” cholesterol. That’s because HDL helps remove cholesterol from your blood. An HDL level of less than 40 increases your risk for heart disease; 60 or higher is protective. Another key number is your total cholesterol, which should be less than 200.

\*Cholesterol levels are measured in milligrams (mg) of cholesterol per deciliter (dL) of blood.

**Overweight/Obesity.** If you are overweight or obese, you are more likely to develop heart disease, even if you have no other risk factors. Overweight also increases the risks for stroke, congestive heart failure, gall bladder disease, diabetes, arthritis, and breathing problems, as well as breast, colon, and other cancers.



**Physical Inactivity.** Not getting regular physical activity increases your risk for heart disease, as well as other heart disease risk factors, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and overweight. And, for older women especially, physical inactivity increases the chances of developing osteoporosis, which in turn raises the risk of broken bones.

**Diabetes.** Diabetes is a major risk factor for heart disease, stroke, kidney failure, and other diseases. The type of diabetes that adults most commonly develop is “type 2.” You are more likely to develop this disease if you are overweight (especially with extra weight around your middle), physically inactive, or have a family history of diabetes. Diabetes can be detected with a blood sugar test.

## Finding Out Your Risk

To protect your heart health, it is important to find out your personal risk for heart disease. Be aware that every risk factor counts. If you have even one risk factor, you are much more likely to develop heart disease, with its many serious consequences. Having more than one risk factor is especially serious, because risk factors tend to “gang up” and worsen each other’s effects. Fortunately, you have tremendous power to prevent heart disease, and you can start today.

The first step is to see your doctor for a thorough checkup. Tell your doctor you want help in achieving your goal of heart health. And don’t hesitate to ask questions, including those given below.

## TAKING ACTION

Now you’re ready for action. Research shows that women can lower their heart disease risk enormously – by 82 percent – simply by leading a healthy lifestyle. In most cases, that means following a heart healthy eating plan, getting regular physical activity, maintaining a healthy weight, and not smoking. Some women also may need to take medication to control heart disease risk factors. In the “To Learn More” section of this fact sheet, you’ll find more resources on how to protect your heart. To get started, read on.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR DOCTOR

Getting answers to these questions will give you vital information about your heart health and what you can do to improve it. You may want to bring this list to your doctor’s office.

- 1 What is my risk for heart disease?
- 2 What is my blood pressure? What does it mean for me, and what do I need to do about it?
- 3 What are my cholesterol numbers? (These include total cholesterol, LDL, HDL, and triglycerides, a type of fat found in the blood and food.) What do they mean for me, and what do I need to do about them?
- 4 What are my “body mass index” and waist measurement? Do they mean that I need to lose weight for my health?
- 5 What is my blood sugar level, and does it mean I’m at risk for diabetes? If so, what do I need to do about it?

- 6 What other screening tests for heart disease do I need?
- 7 What can you do to help me quit smoking?
- 8 How much physical activity do I need to help protect my heart?
- 9 What is a heart healthy eating plan for me?
- 10 How can I tell if I may be having a heart attack? If I think I’m having one, what should I do?

## TO LEARN MORE

Contact the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) for information and publications on heart disease and heart health.

NHLBI Health Information Center  
P.O. Box 30105-0105  
Bethesda, MD 20824  
Phone: 301-592-8573  
TTY: 240-629-3255  
Fax: 301-592-8563

Web Resources from NHLBI and Other Sources  
NHLBI Web site:  
[www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov)

The Heart Truth: A National Awareness Campaign for Women about Heart Disease:  
[www.hearttruth.gov](http://www.hearttruth.gov)

The Healthy Heart Handbook for Women:  
[www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/hearttruth/material/material.htm](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/hearttruth/material/material.htm)

To Quit Smoking:  
[www.nlm.nih.gov/medline-plus/smokingcessation.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medline-plus/smokingcessation.html)

Your Guide to Lowering High Blood Pressure:  
[www.nhlbi.nih.gov/hbp/index.html](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/hbp/index.html)

Facts About the DASH Eating Plan:  
[www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/hbp/dash/index.htm](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/hbp/dash/index.htm)

High Blood Cholesterol: What You Need to Know:  
[www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/chol/hbc\\_what.htm](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/chol/hbc_what.htm)

Live Healthier, Live Longer (on how to lower elevated blood cholesterol):

[www.nhlbi.nih.gov/chd](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/chd)

Introduction to the TLC Diet:  
[www.nhlbi.nih.gov/cgi-bin/chd/step2intro.cgi](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/cgi-bin/chd/step2intro.cgi)

Menopausal Hormone Therapy:  
[www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/women/index.htm](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/women/index.htm)

Aim for a Healthy Weight:  
[www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/lose\\_wt/index.htm](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/lose_wt/index.htm)

Diabetes:  
[www.nlm.nih.gov/medline-plus/diabetes.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medline-plus/diabetes.html)

American Heart Association:  
[www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)

National Women’s Health Information Center, Office on Women’s Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services:  
[www.4woman.gov](http://www.4woman.gov)

WomenHeart: The National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease:  
[www.womenheart.org](http://www.womenheart.org)

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