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### **What is Heart Disease?**

Coronary heart disease is the most common form of heart disease. Usually referred to as simply "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.

### **Why Do Women Need to Know About Heart Disease?**

Historically heart disease was thought of as a predominantly male disease but current statistics show that 1 in 6 women die from Coronary Heart Disease (CHD) making it this country's biggest killer.

More women are dying from a heart problem than breast cancer - in fact every year almost half the women who die will do so from heart and blood vessel disease. Women of any age can develop heart disease but for those approaching the menopause, when estrogen levels drop, it is even more important to take care of your heart.

Lifestyle has a significant impact on women's health. Reducing risk is very effective and simple measures such as stopping smoking and increasing activity can produce great results. Regular checks on blood pressure, cholesterol, weight and diet are important.

### **What are the Risk Factors?**

Major cardiac risk factors include raised cholesterol, high blood pressure, family history of heart disease, smoking, diabetes and lack of physical exercise.

### **Why Women Don't Take Action?**

Women don't put their health as a top priority  
They feel too busy to make changes in their lives  
They think they're not old enough to be at risk  
They think it is a man's disease

### **Getting on the Road to a Healthier Heart!**

A few simple lifestyle changes can dramatically reduce your chances of getting heart disease or having a stroke and - the good news is - it's never too late to start!

### **Cholesterol**

Cholesterol is a silent enemy in the blood - you can't see it or feel it - but it attaches itself to the walls of the arteries (blood vessels) where it builds up, making them narrower. If the coronary arteries become narrow this could affect the flow of blood to the heart.

The levels of cholesterol in the blood are largely affected by the total amount of fat in the diet. The more fat you eat the higher your cholesterol levels will be. Saturated fats are particularly harmful because they raise cholesterol levels the most. Saturated fats should therefore be avoided. They are found in fatty meats, chicken skin, processed meat products such as sausages and pies, full-fat milk and dairy products, butter, hard margarines, and solid cooking fats such as lard.

Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats are beneficial to health when eaten in small amounts. Sources of monounsaturated fats include some soft margarines and olive oils. Sources of polyunsaturated fats include oily fish such as sardines, haddock and mackerel. Oily fish are rich in omega-3-fatty acids which have a beneficial effect on cholesterol levels.

Cooking oils such as corn oil and sunflower oil are good sources of the polyunsaturated fats known as omega-6-fatty acids.

### **Your 'Red Dress' healthy heart plan**

Practical tips to help you achieve a heart-healthy diet are outlined below.

#### Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables:

"Fresh, frozen, tinned and dried varieties of fruit (not in syrup) and vegetables all count.

#### Cut down on fat intake:

"Trim the visible fat from meat, remove the skin from chicken, cut down on processed meat products such as sausages and pies and choose low or reduced fat options when you do eat these.

"Grill or bake foods instead of frying, or stir-fry them using tiny amounts of olive/sunflower oil.

"Go for semi-skimmed or skimmed milk rather than full fat milk.

"Choose low fat or reduced fat cheeses and meat products.

"Cut down on biscuits and cakes, which are high in saturated fat.

#### Replace saturated fat in your diet with polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats:

"Eat at least 2 portions of oily fish such as sardines or salmon a week. Use these to replace processed meats such as sausages and pies.

"Replace butter, margarine and lard with 'heart healthy' spreads and cooking oils which are high in polyunsaturated or monounsaturated fats and low in saturated fats.

#### Reduce your sugar intake:

"Gradually cut down the amount of sugar you add to tea or coffee.

"Eat fewer biscuits, cakes, sweets and desserts. Limit these to mealtimes.

"Choose diet or no added sugar soft drinks.

#### Reduce your salt intake in order to lower blood pressure:

"Choose products marked 'no added salt' or low in salt on the packaging.

"Use herbs and spices instead of salt during cooking.

"Avoid adding salt at the table.

#### Maintain a healthy weight

Maintain a healthy weight for your height. If you are overweight or obese aim to lose weight at a sensible rate. Being overweight or obese may increase your risk of developing high blood pressure and diabetes which are linked to heart disease. Even small reductions in weight can help lower high blood pressure and in turn reduce your risk of heart disease. Switching to healthy eating and increasing your activity levels can help you lose weight. Speak to your GP or Practice Nurse about going on a suitable weight loss plan.

**Physical Activity** Get your body in better shape. We are not suggesting you run a marathon or climb a mountain but at least thirty minutes of physical activity five times a week is a good target to aim for.

Think about using the stairs instead of the lift, leave the car at home and walk the children to school, reclaim your old bike from the shed, or take the dog out for an extra walk. These are all steps in the right direction.

### **Alcohol**

If you use alcohol sensibly it is not likely to harm you. However when alcohol is misused it can cause health and social problems. Moderate drinking means one or two units of alcohol per day for women. One unit of alcohol equals one small glass of wine, or one standard measure of spirits or half a pint of lager.

### **Smoking**

Smoking is harmful to your health. When you smoke you are depriving your heart of essential oxygen. So giving up is one of the best things you can do and by doing so you will immediately reduce the risk of getting heart disease.

Try to avoid second-hand smoke if at all possible - this is particularly important for young children.

There are a number of free, confidential, NHS services which can support you through the quitting process. Like all lifestyle changes, the sooner you start, the healthier you'll be. Think of all the money you'll save - why not put the money to one side for a special treat. Buy yourself a new outfit or some pampering at the beauty salon.

### **Talking to your Doctor**

Have a "heart to heart" with your Doctor about your risk of heart disease.

Draw up a list of questions before your visit.

Tell your Doctor about your lifestyle behaviors, such as smoking or being physically inactive.

Tell your Doctor any symptoms you feel.

Ask your Doctor about key tests to detect heart disease.

## **Learn more about Heart Disease**

### Heart Disease

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

WomenHeart <http://www.womenheart.org/index.asp>

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHBLI) <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/>