



TakeCharge

WELCOA'S SELF-CARE BULLETIN



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT *Heart Disease*

Coronary heart disease—often simply called heart disease—is the main form of heart disease. It is a disorder of the blood vessels of the heart that can lead to heart attack. A heart attack happens when an artery becomes blocked, preventing oxygen and nutrients from getting to the heart. Heart disease is one of several cardiovascular diseases, which are diseases of the heart and blood vessel system. Other cardiovascular diseases include stroke, high blood pressure, angina (chest pain), and rheumatic heart disease.

Heart disease is a lifelong condition—once you get it, you'll always have it. True, procedures such as bypass surgery and percutaneous coronary intervention can help blood and oxygen flow to the heart more easily. But the arteries remain damaged, which means you are more likely to have a heart attack. 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 to prevent and control this disease.

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS FOR HEART DISEASE?

Risk factors are conditions or habits that make a person more likely to develop a disease. They can also increase the chances that an existing disease will get worse. Important risk factors for heart disease that you can do something about are:

- » High blood pressure
- » High blood cholesterol
- » Diabetes and prediabetes
- » Smoking
- » Being overweight or obese
- » Being physically inactive
- » Having a family history of early heart disease

- » Having a history of preeclampsia during pregnancy
- » Unhealthy diet
- » Age (55 or older for women)

Some risk factors, such as age and family history of early heart disease, can't be changed.

HOW DO I FIND OUT IF I AM AT RISK FOR HEART DISEASE?

The first step toward heart health is becoming aware of your own personal risk for heart disease. Some risks, such as smoking cigarettes, are obvious: every woman knows whether or not she smokes. But other risk factors, such as high blood pressure or high blood cholesterol, generally don't have obvious signs or symptoms.

YOU AND YOUR DOCTOR: A HEART HEALTHY PARTNERSHIP

A crucial step in determining your risk is to see your doctor for a thorough checkup. Your doctor can be an important partner in helping you set and reach goals for heart health. But don't wait for your doctor to mention heart disease or its risk factors. Many doctors don't routinely bring up the subject with women patients. Here are some tips for establishing good, clear communication between you and your doctor:

Speak up. Tell your doctor you want to keep your heart healthy and would like help in achieving that goal. Ask questions about your chances of developing heart disease and how you can lower your risk.

Keep tabs on treatment. If you already are being treated for heart disease or heart disease risk factors, ask your doctor to review your treatment plan with you. Ask: Is what I'm doing in line with the latest recommendations? Are my treatments working? Are my risk factors under control? If your doctor recommends a medical procedure, ask about its benefits and risks. Find out if you will need to be hospitalized and for how long, and what to expect during the recovery period.

Be open. When your doctor asks you questions, answer as honestly and fully as you can. While certain topics may seem quite personal, discussing them openly can help your doctor find out your chances of developing heart disease. It can also help your doctor work with you to reduce your risk. If you already have heart disease, briefly describe each of your symptoms. Include when each symptom started, how often it happens, and whether it has been getting worse.

Keep it simple. If you don't understand something your doctor says, ask for an explanation in simple language. Be especially sure you understand how to take any medication you are given. If you are worried about understanding what the doctor says, or if you have trouble hearing, bring a friend or relative with you to your appointment. You may want to ask that person to write down the doctor's instructions for you.

