

# Women and Heart Disease

**Heart disease is the number one cause of death in the United States. Approximately 610,000 people die of heart disease in the United States every year—that is roughly 1 in every 4 deaths. For women, the number of deaths is even more alarming. One in every three American women dies from heart disease, which is about one woman every minute!**

The American Heart Association started its campaign, Go Red for Women®, to raise awareness and to advocate for more research to improve women's heart health. Despite efforts to increase awareness over the past decade, only 54 percent of women recognize that heart disease is their number one killer, and almost two-thirds of women who die suddenly of coronary heart disease have had no previous symptoms.

## What are the Symptoms of a Heart Attack?

While some women have no symptoms, others experience:

### Physical Pain

- angina (dull, heaviness or discomfort in the chest)
- shortness of breath (often before or during the chest discomfort)
- pain in the neck, jaw, or throat
- pain in the upper abdomen or back
- fluttering feelings in the chest (called palpitations)

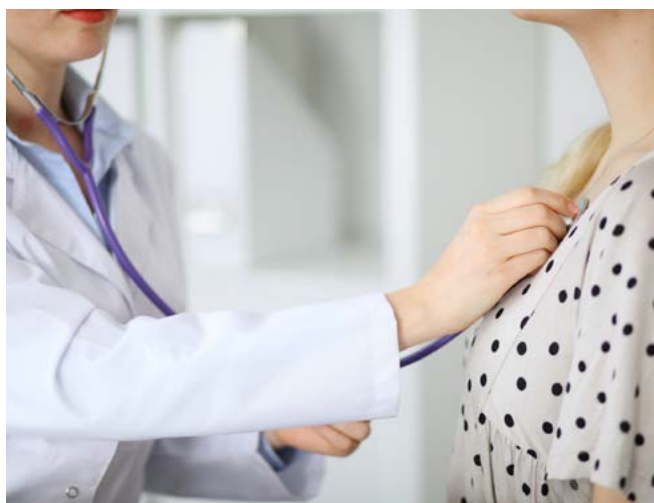
### General Discomfort

- cold-sweats, nausea, light-headedness
- vomiting, extreme fatigue

### Stomach Distress

- indigestion
- heartburn

In general, women are more likely to describe chest pain that is sharp and burning and they more frequently have pain in the throat, abdomen or back. However, a heart attack does not always have obvious symptoms. In fact, a heart attack can actually happen without a person knowing it. This is called a silent heart attack. A silent heart attack may have subtle signs such as indigestion or symptoms of the flu, perception of a strained muscle in the chest or upper back, or possibly prolonged feelings of excessive fatigue. These symptoms often occur in women, and many women do not realize it is a medical emergency.



## What are the Risk Factors of Heart Disease?

There are 3 key risk factors for heart disease:

- smoking
- high blood pressure
- high cholesterol

Approximately half of Americans have at least one of these three risk factors. In addition, there are several other lifestyle choices and conditions that increase the risk for heart disease, such as: diabetes, obesity (overweight), lack of physical activity, poor diet, excessive alcohol use, and family history of heart disease.

While you can't change things like age and family history, the good news is that even modest changes to your diet and lifestyle can improve your heart health and lower your risk.

## How Can You Prevent Heart Disease?

To reduce your chances of getting heart disease, it's important to:

1. Know your blood pressure. High blood pressure rarely has any symptoms so it's important to have your blood pressure checked regularly.
2. Quit smoking.
3. Check your cholesterol and triglyceride levels with your health care provider. Make healthy food choices, limit the consumption of 'bad cholesterol' (LDL) and fatty foods.

- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Limit alcohol. Aim for no more than one drink each day
- Talk to your health care provider about whether you should be tested for type 2 diabetes. Having uncontrolled diabetes raises your risk of heart disease.
- Increase your physical activity.

## Why is Physical Activity Important to Prevent Heart Disease?

By becoming more active you can lower your blood pressure. Physical activity can also boost your levels of good cholesterol, assist in weight loss, and reduce stress, tension, depression and anxiety. Regular moderate to vigorous activity keeps the number one killer of women 'at bay' by reducing risk of heart disease by 30 to 40 percent and reducing risk of stroke by 25 percent.

Women are encouraged to perform two types of physical activity each week: aerobic exercise and muscle-strengthening exercises.

- 150 minutes of moderate intensity aerobic activity every week with additional muscle-strengthening activities on 2 or more days a week

OR

- 75 minutes of vigorous intensity activity with additional muscle-strengthening activities on 2 or more days a week

## Great News! It is OK to Do 10 Minutes of Aerobic Exercise at a Time.

Yes, it's OK to break up exercise into shorter exercise sessions that fit your lifestyle. Even exercise bouts for at least 10 minutes at a time will deliver positive health benefits.

## What are Some Examples of Moderate Intensity Exercise?

- Walking fast
- Doing water aerobics
- Riding a bike on level ground or with few hills
- Playing doubles tennis
- Pushing a lawn mower

## What are Some Examples of Vigorous Intensity Exercise?

- Jogging or running
- Swimming laps
- Riding a bike fast or on hills
- Playing singles tennis
- Playing basketball

## What are Some Suggestions for Strength Training?

To reduce the risk of heart disease, women are encouraged to perform at least 1 set of muscle-strengthening activities for the major muscles of the body. Complete 8 to 12 repetitions (up and down phase) per exercise. For more benefits, aim for 2 or 3 sets of each exercise. You may want to try the following:

- Lifting dumbbells
- Using weight machines
- Working with resistance bands
- Doing exercises that use your body weight for resistance (i.e., push-ups, sit-ups)

It is never too late to modify your lifestyle to reduce your heart disease risk. Little changes every day will lead to a healthier you. Get started today!

## Staying Active Pays Off!

Those who are physically active tend to live longer, healthier lives. Research shows that moderate physical activity—such as 30 minutes a day of brisk walking—significantly contributes to a longer life. Even a person with health risk factors like high blood pressure, depression, diabetes or a smoking habit can gain real benefits from incorporating regular physical activity into their daily life.

As many dieters have found, exercise can also help you achieve weight loss goals. What's more, regular exercise can help lower blood pressure, control blood sugar, improve cholesterol levels and build stronger, denser bones. Exercise helps improve your mental well-being too.

## A Complete Physical Activity Program

Regular physical activity provides many health benefits. While it's not required, working with an exercise professional can help you reach your fitness goals, tailor exercises to your abilities and most importantly, minimize your risk of injury. You should expect the exercise professional to ask you to fill out an exercise pre-participation health screening. This form will ask if you exercise regularly and if you have any health concerns that should prompt you to see your healthcare provider before getting started. The following precautions will help you safely participate in exercise programs:

### If you DO NOT exercise regularly:

If you have not been diagnosed by a doctor with, AND do not have signs or symptoms of cardiovascular, metabolic or kidney disease, THEN you can start right away with light to moderate intensity exercise. You can gradually build up to vigorous exercise if you stay free of any symptoms of health problems.

If you have ever been diagnosed by a doctor, with OR have signs/symptoms of cardiovascular, metabolic or kidney disease, THEN it is recommended to seek medical clearance before beginning an exercise program. Once you get medical clearance, you should start with light to moderate intensity. You can gradually build up to vigorous exercise if you stay free of any symptoms of health problems.

### If you DO exercise regularly:

If you have not been diagnosed with, AND do not have signs or symptoms of cardiovascular, metabolic, or kidney disease, you can continue with moderate exercise or gradually build to vigorous exercise intensity.

If you have been diagnosed with cardiovascular, metabolic, or kidney disease AND do not have any sign/symptoms of health problems, then you can continue exercising at a moderate intensity. If you received medical clearance within the last 12 months AND your symptoms have not changed, then can continue with moderate exercise or gradually build to vigorous exercise intensity.

If at any time you develop a sign or symptom of cardiovascular, metabolic or kidney disease, discontinue exercise and seek a doctor's clearance right away. Then, after getting medical clearance, you may continue your moderate intensity exercise program and gradually progress your effort.

## Getting Started with an Exercise Program

A well-rounded exercise program includes aerobic, strength training exercises, but not necessarily in the same session. This blend helps maintain or improve overall health and function. So, it is important to choose exercises you enjoy and can fit into your schedule.

Not all exercise programs are suitable for everyone. Activities should be carried out at an effort level that is comfortable for you. You should stop participation in any exercise activity that causes pain. In such event, you should consult with your health care professional immediately.

ACSM recommends you accumulate at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity (working hard enough to break a sweat, but still able to carry on a conversation) most days per week, or 20 minutes of more vigorous activity three days per week. Combinations of moderate- and vigorous-intensity activity can be performed to meet this recommendation.

Examples of typical aerobic exercises are: walking, running, stair climbing, cycling, rowing, cross country skiing and swimming. Examples of common strength training exercises are: weight machines, free weights and resistance bands. Flexibility exercises can include: stretches of muscles around different joints and yoga.

## Rights and Permissions

ACSM grants permission to reproduce this brochure if it is reproduced in its entirety without alteration. The text may be reproduced in another publication if it is used in its entirety without alteration and the following statement is added: Reprinted with permission of the American College of Sports Medicine.

Copyright © 2017 American College of Sports Medicine. This brochure was created by Laura Newsome and J.P. Barfield, and is a product of ACSM's Consumer Information Committee. Visit ACSM online at [www.acsm.org](http://www.acsm.org).