

Risk Factors for Heart Disease in Women

DIABETES The risk of heart disease is almost three times higher for women with diabetes.

OVERWEIGHT & OBESITY Excess body weight in women is linked to coronary heart disease, congestive heart failure, stroke and death from heart-related causes. The more overweight, the greater the risk factor. Overweight and obesity also tends to increase cholesterol. Losing weight can help lower Low Density Lipids (LDL), total cholesterol levels, and triglycerides, as well as raise High Density Lipids (HDL). Body shape also increases the risk for heart disease. If the weight is in the upper torso it increases the risk of heart disease.

PHYSICAL INACTIVITY Studies show that physical inactivity is a risk factor for heart disease and that people who are inactive are almost twice as likely to develop heart disease. Even low levels of exercise have proven to reduce the chance of heart disease. Regular physical activity can help lower LDL (bad) cholesterol and raise HDL (good) cholesterol levels. It also promotes weight loss. Everyone should be physically active for 30 minutes on most, if not all, days.

CIGARETTE SMOKING Female smokers are two to six times more likely to have a heart attack than non-smokers. Female smokers that also take oral contraceptives are at an even greater risk for heart disease.

HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE High blood pressure is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke—even slightly elevated pressure can increase the risk. Stress can also cause high blood pressure. Many women today have tremendous schedules that include both in-home and outside-the-home work along with raising children. This complex lifestyle can cause stress and lead to high blood pressure.

HIGH BLOOD CHOLESTEROL More than one-quarter of American women today have elevated cholesterol levels high enough to pose a serious risk for coronary heart disease.

DIET Saturated fat and cholesterol in foods increase blood cholesterol levels. Reducing the amount of saturated fat and cholesterol in the diet helps lower blood cholesterol levels and reduce the risk of heart disease.

AGE AND GENDER As women and men get older, their cholesterol levels rise. Before the age of menopause, women typically have lower total cholesterol levels than men of the same age. After the age of menopause, women's LDL levels tend to rise as their estrogen levels decrease, thus increasing their risk of heart disease.

HEREDITY Individuals of African American decent and/or anyone with a family history of early heart disease (heart disease in father or brother before age 55; heart disease in mother or sister before age 65) is at an increased risk.

