

HEALTH TIPS FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS

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THE MONTH OF FEBRUARY IS AMERICAN HEART MONTH – GO RED FOR WOMEN

STAY STRONG AT HEART: Lower your risk for heart disease by taking a few heart-smart measures. For starters, choose a diet low in saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium. Strengthen your heart with 30-60 minutes of moderate-level activity, such as brisk walking, at least five days a week. Managing stress, losing weight if needed, and avoiding tobacco and secondhand smoke also play important roles in heart health.

Although, I have shared this information with you before, it bears repeating: Know the signs of a heart attack. During a heart attack, women often have one or more of these symptoms:

- Pain, pressure, or a feeling of fullness in the center of the chest.
- Pain or discomfort in other areas of the upper body, including the arms, back, neck, between the shoulders, or jaw
- Shortness of breath (trouble breathing)
- Breaking out in a cold sweat
- Nausea of an upset stomach
- Dizziness
- Fatigue, sometimes for days or weeks

THE CAUSES OF HEART DISEASE IN WOMEN

When it comes to the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of heart disease, men have traditionally received more attention than women. However, women are at equal risk for heart disease and heart attacks. Although women typically develop heart problems about seven to ten years later than men, by about age sixty-five, a woman's risk of heart disease is almost the same as a man's. Blockage of the coronary arteries that supply blood and nutrients to the heart is the leading cause of coronary artery disease and heart attacks in men and women. Certain factors can increase your risk of heart disease. The more risk factors you have, the greater your chance of having a heart attack or stroke. In addition, certain risk factors tend to speed the development of atherosclerosis—the narrowing of arteries due to the buildup of fatty substances. That's why it is important that you identify and eliminate or modify any risk factors you have. Risk factor modification with lifestyle changes as well as taking medication, if needed, can slow the progression of atherosclerosis and help prevent a heart attack.

Although men and women share similar factors that increase their risk of heart disease, such as smoking, high blood pressure (hypertension), diabetes, sedentary lifestyle, high cholesterol, and family history of heart disease, certain factors play a bigger role in the development of heart disease and heart attacks in women. Overall, compared to men, many more women are obese, have a sedentary lifestyle, or have hypertension and diabetes. These particular risk factors play a much more important role in leading to heart disease and heart attacks in women than they do for men.

Bottom line – women need to be more aware of heart disease risk factors and how to control them. As women, we need to stop underestimating our risk of heart disease.

Resources: 2008 & 2009 Women's Health Calendars; & Heart Smart for Black Women and Latinas by Jennifer H. Mieres, M.D., F.A.H.A. & Terri Ann Parnell, R.N., M.A. with Carol Turkington.