

Women and Heart Disease

"It started right after the holidays last year" recounts Marian. "I hadn't been feeling well for a few days. I was tired, I ached, my chest felt tight and I felt sick to my stomach. Thinking that I had a bout of the flu and that the fresh air would do me good, I walked up to the neighbourhood clinic. They were suspicious of my heart, so I was sent immediately to the hospital where they confirmed I had suffered a mild heart attack. Later, I was diagnosed with angina. In fact, I've worried more about my husband. He smoked for years, watches a lot more sports than he plays these days, and usually snacks on chips or peanuts while he sits in front of the television."

Marian's story is not unusual. Traditionally thought of as a "man's disease", heart disease is the number one cause of premature death among Canadian women. Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is a broad term used to describe diseases of the heart and blood vessels. The most common type is atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries. When everything is working properly, the blood flows freely through the body's vessels, but in the case of atherosclerosis, blood cholesterol is deposited on the walls of arteries. Fatty deposits or plaque, build up around the

inside of the artery. Eventually, the artery may become so narrow that blood cannot get through. In some cases, the rough surface of plaque causes blood clots to form which can also block the flow of blood. Either case may result in a heart attack or stroke.

Before menopause, the hormone estrogen, which is produced in a woman's body, provides some protection from heart disease by helping to control blood cholesterol levels. However, at the time of menopause, when estrogen levels begin to drop, women no longer have that protection. At that point, the same factors that put men at risk for heart disease also affect women. They are:

- ï High blood cholesterol
- ï Smoking
- ï High blood pressure
- ï Lack of physical activity
- ï Diabetes

As Marian learned through her experience, women seldom experience the well known symptom of crushing chest pain. Instead, they are more likely to describe vague chest pain; fatigue; shortness of breath; neck, shoulder, arm or back pain; and/or nausea. These early signs are easy to miss and women are less likely to get them checked out.



To prevent heart disease, women, like men, need to be aware of the factors that put them at risk and make the necessary changes. Here are some of the key recommendations for living a heart healthy lifestyle:

- If you smoke, quit or cut down. Health risks due to smoking decrease sharply in the first year of quitting and return to that of a non-smoker in seven years.
- Be physically active everyday. It's a great way to relieve stress and keep your weight in a healthy range.
- Have your blood pressure checked regularly.
- Reduce overall fat intake especially saturated and trans fat (hydrogenated) fats. Saturated fats are found mainly in animal sources such as meat, poultry, eggs and milk products. Trans fats are found in many processed foods like crackers, french fries, lard, shortening. These fats tend to raise blood cholesterol levels.
- Choose higher fibre foods such as whole grains, vegetables and fruit.
- Eat at least two Food Guide Servings (150 grams) of fish each week. Choose omega-3 rich fish such as char, herring, mackerel, salmon, sardines, and trout.
- Choose foods that are lower in salt and sodium. Use low-sodium herbs, spices, and seasonings at the table and in cooking instead of salt to enhance the flavour of the food.
- Vitamin supplements such as vitamin E, vitamin C, beta-carotene, and folic acid should not be used to prevent heart disease.



Here are some hints on how to cut down on fat and boost your fibre intake:

- Eat a variety of foods prepared in different ways. This helps you get all the nutrients you need without getting too much fat or salt.
- Look for milk, yogurt and cottage cheese that says 1% or less M.F. (Milk Fat) on the label.
- Try the new varieties of lower fat cheeses with 20% or less M.F.
- Limit servings of meat, fish and poultry to the size of a deck of cards once it is cooked.
- Use non-hydrogenated margarine on toast. Spread mustard, salsa or some light mayonnaise on sandwiches.
- Use milk in your coffee instead of cream.
- Snack on low-salt pretzels, pita puffs or "light" microwave popcorn.
- In restaurants look for menu items that have been grilled instead of breaded or deep fried.
- When everyone goes out for ice-cream opt for frozen yogurt or sherbet, or have the child size scoop of the gourmet-style ice-cream.
- Eat more legumes. Beans, peas, chickpeas and lentils are full of fibre and low in fat.
- Have at least two fruits and/or vegetables with every meal.