

# Heart Disease and Women

Heart disease is the number one killer of American women. Some heart disease symptoms and risk factors are different for women than men. Some risk factors, such as severe obesity, metabolic syndrome, and depression, happen more often in women. Women also have unique risk factors for heart disease, such as menopause. Some heart disease risk factors, such as diabetes and smoking, are even more dangerous for women. Women do worse after heart attacks compared to men, and women are less likely to join and complete a cardiac rehab program.

## Q: What is heart disease?

**A:** “Heart disease” refers to several types of problems that affect the heart. The most common type of heart disease is coronary artery disease (CAD), also called coronary heart disease. In CAD, plaque builds up on the walls of the arteries that carry blood to the heart. Over time, this buildup causes the arteries to narrow and harden, a process called atherosclerosis. This prevents the heart from getting all the blood it needs. It can also cause a blood clot to develop. If the clot blocks blood flow to the heart it can cause a heart attack.

## Q: How do I know if I have heart disease?

**A:** Heart disease often has no symptoms you can feel, like pain or shortness of breath. Two out of every 3 women who die suddenly from heart disease did not have symptoms.

But there are some signs to watch for. Chest or arm pain or discomfort can be a symptom of heart disease or a warning sign of a heart attack. Women often describe a burning chest pain or pain in the back, neck or jaw. See the seven signs of a heart attack at the [womenshealth.gov/heartattack](http://womenshealth.gov/heartattack) webpage. Call 911 if you think you are having a heart attack rather than driving yourself to the hospital.

If you think you may have heart disease, talk to your doctor. He or she will do tests and ask about your family medical history and health behaviors, including diet, physical activity, and healthy eating.

## Q: What do I need to know about my risk for heart disease?

**A:** Certain habits and health problems raise your risk for heart disease at any age. You can control many of the risk factors for heart disease.

- **Habits you can control** include not smoking, eating healthy, increasing physical activity, limiting alcohol, and reducing stress. Talk to your doctor, nurse or health care provider about steps you can take to quit smoking, eat healthier, and lower your stress.
- **Health problems you can improve** include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, being overweight or obese, and diabetes. If you have one or more of these health problems, work with your doctor, nurse or health care provider to make healthy changes to lower your risk. Your doctor also may prescribe medicine to help you control your blood pressure or cholesterol.
- **Risk factors you can't control** include your age, family history, and menopause. Knowing about risk factors you can't control can help you and your doctor decide on a plan to reduce other risk factors for heart disease.

## Q: How does pregnancy affect my risk for heart disease?

**A:** Tell your primary care doctor if you have had gestational high blood pressure, gestational diabetes, or preeclampsia during a past pregnancy. These pregnancy problems are also signs that you are at higher risk for heart disease later in life, following a pregnancy. Talk to your doctor or nurse about ways to lower your risk for heart disease.

## Q: How does menopause affect my risk for heart disease?

**A:** Women can get heart disease at any age, but your risk increases after menopause. This is because until menopause, the ovaries make the hormone estrogen. Estrogen gives premenopausal women some protection against heart disease by keeping blood vessels relaxed and a healthy cholesterol balance.

## Q: Does birth control affect my risk for heart disease?

**A:** Most types of birth control are safe for young, healthy, nonsmoking women. Certain types of combination hormonal birth control (birth control with both estrogen and progesterone), such as the pill, skin patch, or vaginal ring, may raise your risk for heart disease if you are older than 35 or if you have high blood pressure, diabetes, or high cholesterol. If you smoke, do not use hormonal birth control.

## For more information...

For more information about heart disease, call the OWH Helpline at **800-994-9662** or contact the following organizations:

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute  
**Phone Number: 877-645-2448** • [www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov)

American Heart Association  
**Phone Number: 800-AHA-USA1** • [www.heart.org](http://www.heart.org)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
**Phone Number: 800-232-4636** • [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

Million Hearts  
[www.millionhearts.hhs.gov](http://www.millionhearts.hhs.gov)

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