Strong Heart, Healthy Heart

by Douglas W. Laube, MD

On February 2, 2007, American Heart Month kicks off with National Go Red for Women Day (www.goredforwomen.org). Americans are encouraged to wear red, and by doing so, to help raise awareness about the #1 killer of women.

Heart disease is responsible for more deaths among womenâ€”about 480,000 women every yearâ€”than the next four most common causes of death combined. One in three women will develop heart disease in a lifetime, but many women still do not know they are at risk.

While age and family history play a role in personal susceptibility to heart disease, most of the additional risk factors are modifiable.

Cholesterol occurs naturally in the body, but when present in excess, cholesterol can cause fatty deposits (plaque) to build up in the arteries. Plaque build-up eventually hardens and narrows the blood vessels (arteriosclerosis), restricting blood flow to the heart and setting the stage for a heart attack or stroke. Lowering â€œbadâ€• cholesterol (LDL) and raising â€œgoodâ€• cholesterol (HDL) can help slow plaque build-up. Ideally, a womanâ€™s total cholesterol should be less than 200, LDL less than 100, and HDL greater than 60.

High blood pressure puts extra strain on the heart and blood vessels, increasing the risk of heart attack and stroke. It can also damage the kidneys, brain, and eyes. Systolic blood pressure of less than 120 and diastolic blood pressure of less than 80 (read â€œ120 over 80â€•) is optimal.

Having diabetes increases the chances of heart problems. Additionally, women with diabetes often have other risk factors for heart disease, such as obesity, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure. Managing diabetes with healthy lifestyle changes will also help to minimize these other conditions and protect your heart.

What You Can Do.

Stop smoking. Smoking lowers HDL (â€œgoodâ€• cholesterol) and exacerbates high blood pressure and heart disease, so if you smoke, quit. Losing weight, exercising for 30 to 60 minutes on most days of the week, and lowering dietary fat and sodium intake also work against high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes. If these interventions donâ€™t work, talk to your doctor about medications that may help.

Go Red, be informed, and make heart health a priority.

For more information, the Patient Education Pamphlet â€œKeeping Your Heart Healthyâ€• is available at www.acog.org/publications/patient_ education/bp122.cfm.

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