

WHAT IS *heart* DISEASE?

Coronary heart disease is the main form of heart disease. It is a disorder of the blood vessels of the heart that can lead to heart attack. A heart attack happens when an artery becomes blocked, preventing oxygen and nutrients from getting to the heart. Often referred to as heart disease, it is one of several cardiovascular diseases, which are diseases of the heart and blood vessel system. Other cardiovascular diseases include stroke, high blood pressure, angina and rheumatic heart disease.

One reason some women aren't too concerned about heart disease is that they think it can be "cured" with surgery. This is a myth. Heart disease is a lifelong condition—once you get it, you'll always have it. True, procedures such as bypass surgery and angioplasty can help blood and oxygen flow to the heart more easily. But the arteries remain damaged, which means you are more likely to have a heart attack. What's more, the condition of your blood vessels will steadily worsen unless you make changes in your daily habits. Many women die of complications from heart disease, or become permanently disabled. That's why it is so vital to take action to prevent and control this disease.

WHAT ARE RISK FACTORS?

Risk factors are conditions or habits that make a person more likely to develop a disease. They can also increase the chances that an existing disease will get worse. Important risk factors for heart disease that you can do something about are cigarette smoking, high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, overweight, physical inactivity, and diabetes. Some risk factors, such as age and family history of early heart disease, can't be changed. For women, age becomes a risk factor at 55. After menopause, women are more apt to get heart disease, in part because their body's production of estrogen drops. Women who have gone through early menopause, either naturally or because they have had a hysterectomy, are twice as likely to develop heart disease as women of the same age who have not yet gone through menopause. Another reason for the increasing risk is that middle age is a time when women tend to develop risk factors for heart disease. Family history of early heart disease is another risk factor that can't be changed. If your father or brother had a heart attack before age 55, or if your mother or sister had one before age 65, you are more likely to get heart disease yourself. While certain risk factors cannot be changed, it is important to realize that you do have control over many others. Regardless of your age, background or health status, you can lower your risk of heart disease—and it doesn't have to be complicated. Protecting your heart can be as simple as taking a brisk walk, whipping up a good vegetable soup, or getting the support you need to maintain a healthy weight.