

Women and Heart Health

By Audrey Duke, CFNP

Member of the Coos County Women's Health Coalition

Several years ago, a colleague in her mid fifties came to me wondering what I would suggest for her frequent heartburn. I suggested she talk with her doctor about it, which she did. The next week, she had double bypass surgery. What she was experiencing was angina (heart pain), which was mistaken for heartburn.

In America, 37.6 million women have heart disease. It is the number one killer of women in our country. Typical symptoms of a heart attack include crushing chest pain radiating down the arm, difficulty breathing and nausea. However, in women, often the signs are more subtle and sometimes ignored. Although recognizing signs of a heart attack are critical, preventing heart disease is the most important step we can take. What can we do as women to protect ourselves against heart disease?

First, it is important to be aware of risk factors for heart disease. These include gender, age, and family history. Men over 45, women after menopause, and those with relatives with heart disease are at increased risk. Next, we can reduce risk factors that are affected by our lifestyles. These modifiable risk factors include smoking, diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, excess weight, lack of exercise, poor diet, and stressful life style.

Women who smoke are four times more likely to die of heart disease and nine times more likely if they started before age 15. This risk is greatly reduced by quitting smoking. Diabetes is a heart disease risk factor, but the risk is lowered with proper diabetes control. Risk of heart disease goes up proportionately as your resting blood pressure rises, as well as with rising cholesterol. Some people require medications to

help control cholesterol or blood pressure, but we all can benefit from reducing our blood pressure or cholesterol through dietary measures. Excess weight increases your risk of high blood pressure, diabetes and heart disease. You can go online to calculate a healthy weight for your height using the Body Mass Index, or you can simply measure your waistline. Women with a waist measuring more than 35 inches are at increased risk of a heart attack.

Healthy diets should be low in fat, have plenty of fiber, at least five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, include 1500 mg of calcium a day, and include Omega 3 rich foods at least twice a week (salmon is full of Omega 3 oils). Colorful fresh fruits and vegetables should make up the majority of food on your plate.

The American Heart Association suggests that everyone engage in thirty minutes of moderate activity daily. This activity can be broken up into a couple sessions, with three sessions of ten minutes providing almost as much benefit as thirty continuous minutes. As with any exercise program, check with your Health Care Professional to make sure you are healthy enough to engage in your planned exercise program.

Regardless of current heart disease risk, everyone benefits from a healthy lifestyle. The Women's Health Coalition has developed a program for walking, with walking maps available of Coos Bay and North Bend. Walking is a great way to exercise, requiring no specialized equipment and allowing a gradually increasing level of activity. It also allows you to get out in your community, meet your neighbors, and enjoy the natural beauty of the area. We hope that you will join your family, friends, and neighbors to walk your community and keep your heart healthy!