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Asheville cardiologist tells women how to reduce their risk for heart disease

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Written by Rhoda B. Brosnan Guest columnist

Lyndon B. Johnson issued the first presidential proclamation declaring February as American Heart Month in December 1963.

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He urged the people of the United States “to give heed to the nationwide problem of the heart and blood vessel diseases, and to support the programs required to bring about its solution.”

In 2004, the American Heart Association initiated the Go Red for Women campaign to raise awareness that heart disease is as much a disease of women as it is of men.

Despite these national efforts, heart disease — including coronary artery disease, stroke, heart failure and irregular heart rhythms — remains the No. 1 cause of death in women today.

Fortunately, despite this daunting statistic, heart disease is not inevitable. If you're a woman, what can you do to decrease your risk?

First, answer the following questions about your current risk: Does heart disease run in your family? Are you overweight? Nearly two out of every three U.S. women older than 20 are. Do you have high blood pressure? Are you diabetic? Have you been told your cholesterol is too high? Do you smoke or are you exposed to regular second hand smoke?

If the answer to any of those questions is yes, you are at higher risk for heart disease.

Ways to reduce risk

Fortunately there are many ways to reduce your risk, starting immediately.

First, if you are not already active, **find a way to exercise** comfortably. The American Heart Association recommends 30 minutes of moderate exercise, such as walking, five days a week or 25 minutes of vigorous exercise, such as running or biking, three days a week.



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Strive for a more heart healthy diet that is rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean meat and fish and low in salt and refined sugars. Track your weight and, if your weight is creeping up, make adjustments in your diet before you gain another five pounds.

Give up smoking and encourage your family members to do the same.

Schedule a routine check-up with a physician if you have not had one in the past 12 months, to discuss your risk in more detail.

If you have high blood pressure, diabetes, or elevated cholesterol that requires treatment, **take an active role** in their management. Check your blood pressure and glucose regularly and record the results to share with your healthcare provider. Keep a record of your cholesterol numbers and how they're changing over time.

Finally, if you have symptoms that are concerning for a heart attack, such as chest pain or pressure, arm or jaw discomfort, the sudden onset of shortness of breath or nausea, do not wait. Call 911 immediately.

For more information on the prevention and recognition of heart disease in women, visit the American Heart Association website, www.heart.org.

Dr. Rhoda B. Brosnan is a board-certified general cardiologist with Asheville Cardiology Associates, a member of the Western Carolina Medical Society and the course director for cardiology for the Asheville Regional Campus of the UNC School of Medicine.

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