

Heart disease from page A7

In the Prevention survey, almost 60 percent of women said their doctor has not discussed heart disease, almost half said their doctor doesn't check their cholesterol levels and 87 percent said their doctor hasn't checked their hip-to-waist ratio (a key indicator of heart disease risk).

While studies like the Women's Health Initiative are taking a closer look at heart disease, women have to show their own initiative by raising this issue with their doctors and taking steps to reduce their risk.

"They shouldn't wait for their doctor to raise the subject of heart disease

before they begin taking preventive measures," says Bernadine Healy, M.D., dean of the College of Medicine at Ohio State University.

Here are some steps recommended by the American Heart Association. They may help protect you from other illnesses, as well as heart disease.

If you smoke, stop. The AHA says smoking is women's biggest risk factor for heart attack, and the most preventable. Women who smoke and use some types of oral contraceptives have a much higher risk. Women who live with smokers should know that long-term exposure to secondhand smoke

may also increase the risk of heart disease.

Reduce high blood pressure, which contributes to the risk of stroke and kidney disease, as well as heart disease. More than half of all women 65 and over have high blood pressure, and pregnant women and those taking oral contraceptives also are susceptible to high blood pressure.

Reduce high blood cholesterol. This is another major risk factor for heart disease, and although studies show that women's cholesterol is higher than men's from age 55 on, many doctors fail to check the cholesterol levels of their female patients.

Exercise regularly. Women who are inactive are twice as likely to develop heart disease as those who work out regularly.

Shed excess weight. Obesity raises heart disease and stroke risk by 30 percent, even if you have no other risk factors.

Eat a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol.

Manage stress. Recent studies show that feelings of tension and the inability to relax may be predictors of heart disease. In the Prevention survey, 75 percent of women reported feeling stress in the past two weeks, and more than half said they'd been angry or upset.

"Anger is probably as much of a risk factor for coronary heart disease as are cholesterol, smoking, high blood pres-

sure and a sedentary lifestyle," says Dr. Redford Williams, professor of psychiatry, and director of the Behavioral Medicine Research Center at Duke University Medical Center.

Consider hormone replacement therapy after menopause. The Women's Health Initiative is studying the effect of HRT on reducing heart disease in women because scientists suspect estrogen may play a role in protecting women against heart disease before menopause.

According to the AHA, estrogen therapy reduces the risk of heart attack for post-menopausal women by one-third to one-half. However, women should discuss HRT with their doctors because those with high-risk factors for developing heart disease (including high cholesterol and family history) may benefit from the therapy, while those with a personal or family history of uterine or breast cancer may want to avoid estrogen replacement.

Finally, know your family history. Even women in good health will want to take steps to reduce their risk factors if immediate family members have had heart disease. Racial and ethnic factors also play a role.

African-American women, for example, are more susceptible to high blood pressure, and they are 33 percent more likely to die of coronary heart disease. Hispanic women also face an increased risk of heart disease.

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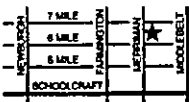
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