

Reducing your risk of heart disease

February 6 2013, by Carolyn Pennington

February is American Heart Month but living a heart healthy lifestyle is important anytime of the year. That's because cardiovascular disease is the number one killer of Americans – one in three of us will die from heart disease or stroke.

In Connecticut, 33 percent of residents die from [cardiovascular problems](#) while 24 percent die from cancer, according to the latest data from the Department of Public Health.

These conditions are also leading causes of disability and also very expensive—together [heart](#) disease and stroke hospitalizations in 2010 cost the nation more than \$444 billion in [health care expenses](#) and lost productivity.

Here are some ways you can reduce your risk of [heart disease](#).

- **Quit smoking.** Smokers have more than twice the risk for heart attack as nonsmokers and are much more likely to die if they suffer a heart attack.
- **Improve cholesterol levels.** The risk for heart disease increases as your total amount of cholesterol increases. A total cholesterol level over 200, a HDL, or "good" cholesterol level under 40, or a LDL, or "bad" cholesterol level over 160 indicates an increased risk for heart disease. About 38 percent of Connecticut adults have [high cholesterol](#).
- **Control high blood pressure.** Hypertension, or [high blood](#)

[pressure](#), is the most common [heart disease risk](#) factor. In Connecticut, about one in four adults has high blood pressure and males are more likely than females.

- **Get active.** People who don't exercise have higher rates of death and heart disease compared to people who perform even mild to moderate amounts of physical activity. Even leisure-time activities like gardening or walking can lower your risk of heart disease.
- **Eat right.** Eat a heart-healthy diet low in fat and cholesterol. Try to increase the amounts of vitamins you eat, especially antioxidants, which have been proven to lower your risk for heart disease.
- **Achieve and maintain a healthy weight.** Excess weight puts significant strain on your heart and worsens several other heart disease [risk factors](#) such as diabetes. Researchers now know that obesity itself increases heart disease risk.
- **Manage stress and anger.** Poorly controlled stress and anger can lead to heart attacks and strokes. Use stress and anger management techniques to lower your risk.
- **Control diabetes.** If not properly controlled, diabetes can lead to significant heart damage including heart attacks and death. Around 7 percent of state residents have diagnosed diabetes – males more likely than females, and blacks and Hispanics more likely than whites.

When should my loved one go to the emergency room?

Call 911 if he or she has:

- New chest [pain](#) or discomfort that is severe, unexpected, and occurs with shortness of breath, sweating, nausea, or weakness.
- Fast heart rate (more than 150 beats per minute)—especially if

he is short of breath, too.

- Shortness of breath NOT relieved by rest.
- Sudden weakness or paralysis (inability to move) in the arms or legs.
- Sudden, severe headache.
- Fainting spell with loss of consciousness.

Women don't always get the same classic heart attack symptoms as men, such as crushing chest pain that radiates down one arm. Those heart attack symptoms can certainly happen to women, but many experience vague or even "silent" symptoms that they may miss.

These six heart attack symptoms are common in women:

1. **Chest pain or discomfort.** It may feel like a squeezing or fullness, and the pain can be anywhere in the chest, not just on the left side. It feels like a vise being tightened.
2. **Pain in your arm(s), back, neck, or jaw.** This type of pain is more common in women than in men. It may confuse women who expect their pain to be focused on their chest and left arm. The pain can be gradual or sudden, and it may wax and wane before becoming intense.
3. **Stomach pain.** Sometimes people mistake stomach pain that signals a heart attack with heartburn, the flu, or a stomach ulcer. Other times, women experience severe abdominal pressure that feels like an elephant sitting on your stomach.
4. **Shortness of breath, nausea, or lightheadedness.** If you're having trouble breathing for no apparent reason, you could be having a heart attack, especially if you're also having one or more other symptoms.
5. **Sweating.** Breaking out in a nervous, cold sweat is common among

women who are having a [heart attack](#). It will feel more like stress-related sweating than perspiration from exercising or spending time outside in the heat.

6. Fatigue. Some women who have heart attacks feel extremely tired, even if they've been sitting still for a while or haven't moved much.

Provided by University of Connecticut

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