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*The National Women's Health Information Center*

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## **Frequently Asked Questions about How to Talk to Your Health Care Provider about Heart Disease and Heart Health**

### **Why should I be concerned about talking to my health care provider about heart disease?**

Many women think heart disease is a man's problem, but heart disease is very much a woman's problem. Did you know that heart disease is the #1 killer of women, as well as men in America? Heart disease is a general term for a wide variety of diseases and conditions that affect the function of the heart. For detailed information on the different types of heart disease, refer to the NWHIC FAQ on "Heart and Cardiovascular Disease."

It is important for every woman, together with her health care provider(s), to address her risk for heart disease. And, it is equally important to talk with your provider about ways you can reduce your heart disease risk. If you are ever concerned about symptoms that you think might be related to your heart, see your provider right away – never wait! When you have symptoms, the sooner you see your provider, the better.

### **What is the best way to talk to my health care provider about heart disease?**

All women need to take an active role in their health care. Forming a good partnership with your health care provider is a great place to start. Good partnerships depend on good communication. You will get more out of each visit with your provider, and help your provider to give you the best possible care, if you learn how to talk about any symptoms you might be having, as well as your lifestyle. Here are some tips to help you better communicate with your provider.

- Be prepared. Make a list of your concerns and questions and bring them with you when you see your provider. Make another list of any medications that you are taking including any over-the-counter drugs (non-prescription). You might even want to bring all of your medications in their pill bottles or packages, to show your provider. Also, make a note of any past illnesses, surgeries, and treatments, including mental health treatment.
- Tell your story. Your provider will ask you about your lifestyle and habits, such as your diet, exercise, smoking, and other issues related to heart health. Be sure to mention if you have ever been told that you have high blood pressure or cholesterol. Also let your provider know if anyone in your family has had a heart attack or stroke, or any history of heart disease. If you are having symptoms, tell your provider when they began, how often they happen, and whether they are getting better, worse, or staying the same. Keeping a diary of your symptoms will help you keep track of them and help you talk about them with your provider. You can even bring your diary with you to your visit.
- Take notes. This will help you to remember what your provider tells you. You can also use your note pad to write down questions as you think of them.

- Ask questions. Your provider may order tests to assess your risk or symptoms, and then recommend certain lifestyle changes or specific treatments. Make sure that you fully understand your condition and any tests ordered or treatments prescribed. If your provider says something that you do not understand, ask her or him to explain. Keep in mind that there are no “stupid” questions – every question that you might have is important when it comes to your heart health.
- Speak up for yourself. If you do not feel that your provider has fully answered your question or addressed a symptom, be sure to let her or him know! (See Ask questions above.) If a prescribed treatment is not working or you are having side effects, be sure to let your provider know your concerns. Your provider can talk with you about why the treatment might be causing side effects or not working the way it should. And, she or he may prescribe a different treatment(s) that could work better for you.

## **What types of questions might I ask my health care provider about my heart health?**

Here are some helpful questions that you can ask your health care provider about heart health:

- What are the warning signs and symptoms of heart disease? (List any symptoms you might be having or are concerned about.)
- What are my personal risk factors for heart disease?
- What effect does menopause have on my heart disease risk?
- What is a healthy weight for me?
- What physical activity and activity level is right for me?
- What are my cholesterol levels and where should they be?
- What is my blood pressure and what should it be?
- What else can I do to lower my risk of heart disease?
- Are there any diagnostic tests or procedures that I should have to determine my risk for heart disease or for any symptoms that I might be having?
- If I need diagnostic tests or procedures, what information can I expect to get from the test and/or procedure and how will the results be used to make decisions about my care?
- What risk, if any are there for the diagnostic tests or procedures that I might need? Are there any risks to NOT having the test or procedure?
- Is there any special preparation I need to do before having the diagnostic test or procedure, such as fasting? Will there be any discomfort or things that I cannot do after the test or procedure?

- If medication is prescribed: Why was it prescribed? When do I take it? How much do I take? What other medications, food, or activities do I need to avoid (if any) while taking it? What side effects are common? Are there generic alternatives and are they right for me?
- When do I need to follow up with you to make sure your recommended medications, treatments, and/or lifestyle changes are working?
- Based on what I have told you and the tests and procedures you have done, do you believe that my symptoms are caused by heart disease?
- Where can I go for more information about heart disease? (See “For more information...” below.)

## **For more information...**

You can find out more about heart disease by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center (800) 994-WOMAN (9662) or the following organizations:

### **National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI)**

Phone Number(s): (301) 592-8573

Internet Address: <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/index.htm>

### **National Cholesterol Education Program**

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI)

Internet Address: <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/chd>

### **National High Blood Pressure Education Program**

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI)

Internet Address: <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/about/nhbpep/index.htm>

### **The Heart Truth**

National Awareness Campaign for Women about Heart Disease

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI)

Phone Number(s): (800) 575-9355

Internet Address: <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/hearttruth/index.htm>

### **Act In Time to Heart Attack Signs Campaign**

National Heart Attack Alert Program

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI)

Phone Number(s): (301) 592-8573

Internet Address: <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/actintime/>

### **American Heart Association**

Phone Number(s): (800) 793-2665

Internet Address: <http://www.americanheart.org/>

**Texas Heart Institute**

Phone Number(s): (800) 292-2221

Internet Address: <http://www.texasheartinstitute.org/>

**American Society of Echocardiography**

Phone Number: 919-861-5574

Internet Address: <http://www.asecho.org>

**American College of Cardiology**

Phone Number(s): (800) 253-4636

Internet Address: <http://www.acc.org/>

**WomenHeart**

Phone Number: 202 728-7199

Internet Address: [www.womenheart.org](http://www.womenheart.org)

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