

Heart disease has traditionally been considered a disease of men, but the truth is that it is the number one cause of death for men and women alike. Each minute one woman dies of cardiovascular disease and one out of three women are living with it in some form.

Warning signs for women are often different than more highly publicized warning signs for men.

Eighty percent of heart disease deaths are preventable by lifestyle changes such as:

Weight management – It's true that obesity is a major risk factor for heart disease, but ideal weight levels differ from person to person, based on your height your doctor will determine your BMI (body mass index). Ask a doctor what your ideal weight would be for a healthier heart.

Exercise – Physical activity is great for your health overall. Most cardiologists recommend a minimum 30 minutes of moderate physical activity five days a week. If you don't have time for a full 30 minutes, separate workouts into 10 or 15-minute 'bursts' that can make exercise more manageable.

Lower cholesterol - Cutting down on saturated fat and cholesterol in your diet goes a long way in keeping your heart and arteries healthy. Try to reduce consumption of full fat dairy products and red meats.

Decrease risk of high blood pressure – High sodium intake increases blood pressure. The average American eats about 3,400 mg of sodium a day. However, the American Heart Association recommends consuming less than 1,500 mg of sodium per day. You may want to start checking sodium levels on nutrition labels.

Healthy diet alternatives – Not all fats are bad. "Good fats" are monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats commonly present in foods like avocado, salmon and nuts. The "bad fats" are saturated and trans fats they tend to be more solid at room temperature (like a stick of butter). But all fats are high in calories, so try to balance the amount of calories you eat from all foods with the amount of calories you burn. Aim to eat a dietary pattern that emphasizes intake of vegetables, fruit, and whole grains; includes low-fat dairy products, poultry, fish, legumes, non-tropical vegetable oils and nuts; and limits intake of sodium, sweets, sugar sweetened beverages and red meats. Doing so means that your diet will be low in both saturated fats and trans fats.

Stop smoking – The dangers of smoking are common knowledge. In addition to lung disease, smoking can also raise your blood pressure and damage your coronary arteries. It can also make the lining of blood vessels stickier, making it easier for blood clots to form.

The Heart and Pregnancy

Pregnant women are especially vulnerable to a variety of medical conditions and issues that can threaten their and their children's lives. Pregnancy is like a physiologic "stress test" for woman's heart and circulatory system, it can pose serious risks not only for the impending birth but also cause serious long-term complications for the mother. Even healthy mothers can experience heart problems during pregnancy.

During pregnancy, a woman's blood volume typically increases from thirty to fifty percent, all in order to provide nourishment for the growing fetus. However, as blood volume increases, so does the amount of work the heart has to perform. A pregnant woman's heart has to exert twice as much effort to circulate the increased blood volume.

During labor and delivery blood pressure and heart rate can drastically change putting additional strain on heart muscle. After the birth of the baby, the heart muscle can be further stressed as extra volume returns to circulation from placenta and reabsorbs from the body.

Women with pre-existing heart disease may experience worsening in their condition and have more severe signs and symptoms at any time during pregnancy, labor, delivery and postpartum.

Cardiac complications may manifest themselves at any time during pregnancy or within a year after what seemed to be normal pregnancy.

Menopause and Heart Disease

Factors around the time of menopause can increase the risk for heart disease. Smoking or an unhealthy diet early in life can begin to take its toll. A decline in the natural hormone estrogen may also increase heart disease risk as it is believed that the hormone helps to keep blood vessels flexible. Women should discuss heart health with their gynecologist and/or primary care physician at all stages of life.

Heart Attack Symptoms in Symptoms

Many women attribute heart attack symptoms to conditions like the flu or acid reflux.

1. Uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain in the center of your chest. It lasts more than a few minutes, or goes away and comes back.
2. Pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach.
3. Shortness of breath with or without chest discomfort.
4. Other signs such as breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea or lightheadedness.
5. As with men, women's most common heart attack symptom is chest pain or discomfort. But women are somewhat more likely than men to experience some of the other common symptoms, particularly shortness of breath, nausea/vomiting and back or jaw pain.

If you have any of these signs, call 911 and get to a hospital right away.

To make an appointment with one of New Jersey's top cardiologists, visit rwjbh.org/heart or call **888.724.7123**.



RWJBarnabas Health Cardiac Care Centers

- ▶ Clara Maass Medical Center, Belleville
- ▶ Community Medical Center, Toms River
- ▶ Jersey City Medical Center, Jersey City
- ▶ Monmouth Medical Center and the The Unterberg Children's Hospital at Monmouth Medical Center, Long Branch
- ▶ Monmouth Medical Center, Southern Campus, Lakewood
- ▶ Newark Beth Israel Medical Center and Children's Hospital of New Jersey, Newark
- ▶ Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital and The Bristol-Myers Squibb Children's Hospital at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital, New Brunswick
- ▶ Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital Hamilton
- ▶ Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital Rahway
- ▶ Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital Somerset, Somerville
- ▶ Saint Barnabas Medical Center, Livingston

To make an appointment with one of New Jersey's top cardiologists, visit [rwjbh.org/heart](https://www.rwjbh.org/heart) or call **888.724.7123**.

Women and Heart Health

