

Put Your Heart on That To-Do List

Women must keep a healthy lifestyle to avoid cardiovascular disease, experts advise

(HealthDayNews) -- After sending the kids off to school, putting in a full day's work and tending to household chores, most women find there's precious little time to exercise, meditate or prepare luscious, heart-healthy meals.

So if you're one of those women and you think you're not at risk of heart disease, think again: One in three American women dies of heart disease, making it the top killer of women in the United States, the NHLBI reports.

That's why, women's health advocates say, making time for yourself is so important.

"A woman has to give herself permission to take charge and take care of her life," said Dr. Barbara Alving, acting director of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), which is sponsoring "The Heart Truth," a campaign to raise women's awareness of heart disease.

As a key part of that initiative, Americans are encouraged to wear red on Friday, Feb. 4, which has been designated National Wear Red Day.

Coronary heart disease, the most common form of the disease, can start early in life -- even in a woman's teen years -- and progresses over time. Without treatment, the disease will worsen, eventually causing death or disability, government data show.

If you're middle-aged, now's the time to act. From ages 40 to 60, a woman's risk of heart disease begins to rise, according to the

NHLBI. But there is plenty you can do to improve your heart health and dodge the serious consequences of heart disease. The first step is to know whether you are at risk.

On Feb. 18, Sister to Sister: Everyone Has a Heart Foundation Inc. will host the fourth annual National Women's Heart Day, an opportunity for women to get free heart disease screenings and information on living a healthy lifestyle. Heart-health screenings, including tests for total cholesterol, high-density lipoprotein (or good cholesterol), blood glucose, blood pressure and body mass index will be offered at health fairs in 12 cities.

Of the 10,000 women screened during the first three years, 30 percent have discovered they are, indeed, at risk for heart disease.

"That has been the most unbelievable finding," said Sister to Sister Founder and President Irene Pollin, a psychiatric social worker.

High blood sugar, high cholesterol, elevated blood pressure, physical inactivity, smoking, obesity and overweight are all major risk factors for heart disease. Diabetes, advancing age and a family history of heart disease also can boost a woman's risk.

Such information is readily obtainable through simple screenings and patient histories. "The next step is how do you really motivate these women, and that's what we do," Pollin said.

Once a woman knows her numbers and whether she's at risk for heart disease, she can begin to do something about it. Easier said than done? Sure, but there are many ways to live healthier, medical professionals say. You just have to make it part of your routine.

"This has to become a way of life, just like brushing your teeth in the morning," Alving said.

At the NHLBI, employees walk around with pedometers provided free of charge to motivate them to increase their level of physical activity. Alving's personal goal is 10,000 steps a day, but even a less-ambitious number can mark an improvement. "If a woman only does 5,000, if she can work on 7,000, that's great," she said.

Employees also are welcome to take 10 minutes out of their workday to lift free weights, ride a recumbent bike, or use an elliptical stair climber. That equipment is provided for free in designated "take 10 rooms," allowing for a short exercise break with no need to shower afterward.

"This is our way of trying to really work it into the workday," Alving said.

And don't forget diet. The American Heart Association recommends eating plenty of fruits, vegetables and whole grains and avoiding saturated fats to help reduce your risk for heart attack and stroke.

Even frequent restaurant diners can find a way to enjoy a meal without overindulging on the super-sized portions frequently served. "I have started asking for bags to take home now," Alving admitted.

More information

For a list of the cities for National Women's Heart Day, visit Sister to Sister: Everyone Has a Heart Foundation Inc.

By Karen Pallarito

SOURCES: Barbara Alving, M.D., acting director, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, and director, Women's Health Initiative, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Md.; Irene Pollin, M.S.W., founder and president, Sister to Sister: Everyone Has a Heart Foundation Inc., Chevy Chase, Md.; American Heart Association, Dallas

Last Updated: December 2005

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