



## *Cardiovascular Disease:* #1 Health Threat for *Women*

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Ask a group of women what the most important female-related health issue is, and the answer you are most likely to get is Breast Cancer. While this is indeed a major problem, **cardiovascular disease (CVD) is the single largest cause of death among women in the world.** In fact, in the US, more women than men die every year from CVD, something that even most physicians don't appreciate. Moreover, larger numbers of men and women than ever are living with the effects of CVD due to advances in medical science. Combine this with existing trends in our society towards increased weight gain, decreased physical activity, amongst others, and the number of people at risk for CVD continues to grow. However, this state of affairs need not exist because **most CVD is preventable!**

Before menopause, most women enjoy a relative protection against cardiovascular disease. There are 2 exceptions to this general rule: **women who smoke and those who have diabetes may lose this protection.** After menopause, a woman's risk for CVD progressively increases, eventually catching up to, and surpassing, that of man. Despite this, the diagnosis of CVD in women may come late, or not at all, because they often present with "atypical" symptoms, such as weakness or fatigue without associated chest pain. Consequently, women are often under-treated compared with men.

In March, the American Heart Association published its 2007 updated evidence-based guidelines for cardiovascular disease prevention in women. The expert panel that authored these guidelines based their recommendations on the strength of evidence from an exhaustive review of the medical literature, as well as on the opinions from leaders in the field. Chief among their lifestyle recommendations is that **women should perform a minimum of 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity (like brisk walking) on most, and preferably all, days of the week; women who need to lose weight or sustain weight loss should accumulate a minimum of 60-90 minutes per day.** Regarding diet, women should consume fruits, vegetables, whole-grain, high-fiber foods, low-fat dairy products, and fish (especially oily fish), and reduce their intake of saturated and trans fat and sodium. Women were also recommended not to smoke, to avoid environmental tobacco smoke, and to **maintain/achieve a body mass index of 18.5-24.9 kg/m<sup>2</sup> and a waist circumference less than or equal to 35 inches.** The experts also reviewed the use of medications and supplements in the treatment of CVD in women. Based on the preponderance of evidence showing no benefit and/or potential harm, they recommended **against** the routine use of aspirin in healthy women under 65 years of age to prevent myocardial infarction, **against** the use of hormone replacement therapy

expressly for the prevention of CVD, and **against** the use of antioxidant vitamin supplements for the prevention of CVD.

Clearly, some of these guidelines will be questioned. They are obviously only as good as the evidence on which they are based, and may be subject to bias. However, it is difficult to find fault with the lifestyle recommendations. Results of the Nurses Health Study (published in July 2000) showed that women who were not smoking, had a normal body mass index (see above), engaged in moderate-vigorous physical activity of at least 30 minutes/day, ate a diet similar to that detailed above, and consumed half of an alcoholic drink daily had an **83% lower risk for a coronary event** compared to those women who did not follow all of these guidelines. These results illustrate that most cardiovascular disease in women can be prevented (and men, too!) simply by paying more attention to lifestyle!