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Health District Urges Women to Maintain Heart Health

By Lori DiPietro, BSPH, Health Educator

Did you know that cardiovascular disease is the number one cause of death globally? According to the World Health Organization (WHO), more people die annually from cardiovascular diseases than from any other cause, with one in four people dying every day. By 2030, almost 25 million people will die from cardiovascular diseases, mainly from heart disease and stroke. For these reasons, the American Heart Association has declared the month of February as National Heart Month.

Cardiovascular diseases are a group of disorders of the heart and blood vessels. The risk of cardiovascular disease increases with age, and the risk is higher if your father or brother was diagnosed with coronary heart disease before the age of 55, or if your mother or sister was diagnosed with coronary heart disease before the age of 65.

While cardiovascular disease is often mistaken as a disease that only affects older men, it is the number one killer of women each year, and the leading cause of disability among women. According to the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, one reason some women are not too concerned about heart disease is that they think it can be "cured" with surgery or medication. However, this is a myth, because the arteries will remain damaged, which increases the likelihood of having a heart attack.

According to the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, African American and Hispanic women have high rates of the major risk factors for heart disease, including obesity, physical inactivity, high blood pressure, and diabetes. In fact, African American women are 1.5 times more likely to die of heart disease than Caucasian women.

Women generally have heart attacks about a decade later than men do and are more likely to die from them. This is related to the occurrence of menopause; the loss of estrogen is a major contributing factor in the development of heart disease in women. The reduction of estrogen also leads to an increased level of LDL cholesterol. The higher level of this unwanted cholesterol following menopause coincides with the age at which high blood pressure emerges as a significant concern.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, several medical conditions and lifestyle choices can put women at a higher risk for heart disease including: high cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes, smoking, being overweight or obese, a poor diet, physical inactivity, alcohol use, having a family history of early heart disease and being over the age of 55.

Multiple sources have recognized that women often have different symptoms than men when a heart attack strikes. While the most common symptom with heart attack is pain, pressure, or discomfort in the chest, the Food and Drug Administration states that the most important sign for women is feeling extremely fatigued, even after a good night's sleep. Women often experience a sudden onset of weakness that feels like the flu, and they are more likely to have a heart attack without chest pain than men. Women are more apt to have symptoms such as difficulty breathing, trouble sleeping, nausea or vomiting, feeling anxious or scared, worsening headache, pain in the back between the shoulders, pain above the navel, sweating and chest pain or tightness that spreads to the jaw, neck, ear, shoulders or the inside of the arms.

There is good news for women, however; heart disease is not an inevitable result of aging, but is largely

preventable by adopting a healthy lifestyle. Managing stress effectively, being physically active, reducing salt intake, and eating a healthy, well-balanced diet are additional ways to reduce the threat of cardiovascular disease.

Information about heart disease in women can be found on the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute website at <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/> or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <http://www.cdc.gov>.

For more information about this or any other public health issue, please contact the Central Connecticut Health District, serving the towns of Berlin, Newington, Rocky Hill and Wethersfield at (860) 721-2822 or visit our website at www.ccthd.org.