

time to take care of that ticker

Experts share
what we should
know and do to
keep our hearts
healthy

BY KATHLEEN N. WEBBER

I never really ponder the health of my heart. I fret over an elongated to-do list. I worry about the time I forgot to take my son to a birthday party (he still hasn't forgiven me). But my heart beating through it all I take for granted. Like my friends, I worry about breast cancer but not heart disease. I'm too young.

Randi Musnitsky thought the same thing. For the mother, teacher, and part-time grad student from Livingston, the simple act of climbing the steps, at 39, left her winded. She told no one, though. She was thin, watched what she ate, and

Getting your heart rate up for 20 minutes three times a week strengthens your heart muscle and lowers cholesterol.

exercised. When she started experiencing pain in her left arm, she went to her general practitioner, who told her to go home and rest because she was doing too much.

Six months later she went to a cardiologist. Her electrocardiogram showed no problems, but 30 seconds into her stress test on a treadmill, “it felt like an elephant was on my chest,” she says. The next day, at home, the elephant was back.

She never said a word to her family. She sent them on their way for a bike ride, called a friend who knew what was happening, and went to the hospital where doctors put two stents in that saved her life.

“I didn’t want to call 911, because I didn’t want to bother anyone,” she says 10 years after her surgery was performed. “I know if one of my kids came to me with these complaints, I would have taken them right to the ER, but women keep it to themselves. I tell women all the time now to listen to their body and be their own advocates.”

“Women are more likely to have shortness of breath, exertional fatigue, the sweats, or indigestion,” says Dr. Stuart Barr.

Musnitsky’s symptoms — chest pain and pain or numbness in the left arm — are the classic symptoms men often have during a heart attack but women might feel differently.

“Women are more likely to have shortness of breath, exertional fatigue, the sweats, or indigestion,” says Dr. Stuart

Barr of Westwood Cardiology.

That doesn't mean you run to the ER every time you get winded. But if new symptoms arise, call your doctor.

Consider that since 1984 more women than men are dying each year of heart disease and that one out of two women will die of a heart-related illness.

Even though 40 percent of women say they know about the risks of heart disease, only 13 percent say it is a personal risk.

All the news is not glum. "Heart disease is preventable, treatable, and manageable, and you can live happily every after," Dr. Michael Aaron, D.O. of Shore Heart Group says.

Here are some quick and easy ways to help prevent heart disease.

KNOW AND UNDERSTAND THE NUMBERS THAT MATTER MOST

CHOLESTEROL

"Your total should be under 200," says Janet Strain, M.D., of Cardiac and Endovascular Associates in Hawthorne, "but more importantly, your LDL (low-density lipoproteins; think L for lousy or bad cholesterol) should be as low as possible; shoot for under 130 if you have no other risks (if you do that number should be even lower). The HDL, or good cholesterol, has a protective effect."

BLOOD PRESSURE

These goals move every few years and are colored if you have diabetes," says Dr. Strain. "If you want to lower the numbers, I tell patients to consume less salt, lose weight, and exercise."

ATYPICAL SYMPTOMS

"Atypical symptoms (of heart disease) are palpitations, fatigue, indigestion, and jaw discomfort," says Michael Aaron, "Believe it or not, many dentists will see patients and recognize heart disease."

AD

AD

There is also a correlation between hypertension in pregnancy and later in life. “If you were hypertensive while pregnant, you should be monitored earlier for this risk.”

WAIST SIZE

Women tend to get central obesity says Dr. Strain. “If you are a man, your waist circumference should be less than 40 inches, and for a woman it is 35 inches,”

she says. “That fatty tissue in your middle tends to release certain hormones that damage your organs.”

BASAL METABOLIC RATE

“If you go on the Go Red for Women Web site (goredforwomen.org), you can find out your BMI based on height and weight,” Dr. Strain says. “Anyone who is in the obese category should be warned,” she adds. “There is a link between obesity and heart disease, kidney disease, diabetes, and even some cancers.” The American Heart Association’s Go Red for Women campaign educates, encourages, and inspires women about what they can do to prevent heart disease.

WAYS YOU CAN SHOW YOUR HEART A LITTLE LOVE

KICK THE HABIT

“Smoking is the single worst thing you can do for your heart,” says Jacqueline Hollywood, M.D., of the Advanced Cardiology Institute, which is affiliated with Englewood Hospital. If you are having trouble quitting, consider one of the new cessation drugs. “There are new drugs on the market that I have been having luck with,” says Strain. “One, called Chantix, works in the brain to decrease the craving for nicotine,” says Dr. Strain.

PLAN YOUR MEALS

You know the drill: Eat vegetables, fruits, fish, and lean meats. We can take a cue from the June Cleaver era. “Years ago, our parents had a healthy dinner on the table every night,” Dr. Strain says. “It’s a detriment to our diets that no one cooks, because there aren’t many ways to eat fast that are healthy. Our bodies are not designed to be eating such large volumes of food. Everything is supersized and at our fingertips.” Try to prepare meals ahead of time so you’re not tempted to eat fast food.

AD

“A walk at a brisk pace for 30 minutes a day or for an hour three times a week does a heart good,” says Dr. Hollywood.

GO FISHING

“Omega-3, which is found in salmon, is good for your heart and brain,” says Dr. Hollywood, a cardiologist and spokeswoman for the Go Red for Women campaign. “If you are not getting enough omega-3, take fish-oil supplements.”

HOLD THE CHEESE, PLEASE

If your cholesterol is high, Dr. Aaron suggests staying away from the obvious suspects: yolks, whole milk, whole-milk cheeses, and baked goods.

A DRINK A DAY CAN KEEP THE CHOLESTEROL AT BAY

“For those who enjoy a drink a night, alcohol will raise good cholesterol,” Dr. Strain says. “Anything from a gin and tonic to wine or beer. Red wine is one of the best for the heart because of the antioxidants it contains.

PEDAL AND WALK, OR PRUNE AND DIG

The goal with exercise is to get your heart rate up for 20 minutes three times a week to strengthen your heart muscle and lower your cholesterol. “You don’t need a trainer or even a gym,” says Dr. Hollywood. “A walk at a brisk pace for 30 minutes a day or for an hour three times a week does a heart good,” she adds. If traditional forms of exercise don’t suit you, consider the fact that 30 minutes of gardening (raking, digging, spading, trimming shrubs by hand, or using the push mower) five times per week can improve cardiovascular fitness and lower blood pressure and cholesterol. And think how good your lawn and garden will

look afterwards!

CONSIDER A CHOLESTEROL-REDUCING DRUG

If exercise and diet alone are not bringing down your cholesterol, ask your doctor about a prescription for a medicine such as Crestor, Lipitor, or Vytorin.

DON'T RELY ON HORMONE REPLACEMENT

Although physicians say most premenopausal women are protected from heart disease by estrogen, studies now show replacement therapy does not help prevent heart disease.

FIGHT CHOLESTEROL WITH NIACIN

“Niacin lowers total cholesterol and triglycerides and raises HDL,” Dr. Strain says. The potential downside? Flushing. “For some people, taking it will make them feel like they are having a hot flash,” Strain explains.

BE A BABY

Women older than 65 should ask their doctor about taking a daily low-dose “baby” aspirin to help protect their heart. One 81-milligram tablet is enough, doctors say. “If someone were at higher risk because of family history, then they should start taking one by age 50,” Dr. Hollywood says.

SEE YOUR GP ANNUALLY

“You don’t need to see your cardiologist to know your numbers,” Dr. Hollywood notes. “See your general practitioner every year, get an annual physical, and

get your cholesterol tested on a regular basis to make sure you know your risks.”

SPEAK UP FOR YOURSELF

“Don’t let your doctor minimize symptoms,” Dr. Aaron says. “And make sure he or she is attuned to a woman’s symptoms versus a man’s or an older person’s.” Survivor Randi Musnitsky now tells women she meets to be speak up. “If you are not happy with what one doctor is telling you, go to another you feel more comfortable with,” she suggests.

Want another way to love your heart? The Fifth Annual New Jersey American Heart Association’s Go Red For Women luncheon, May 7, at The Palace at Somerset Park will feature educational sessions, a silent auction,

NEW TESTS AND PROCEDURES YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

HIGH-SENSITIVITY C-REACTIVE PROTEIN TEST

This cardiac marker blood test is being used to detect heart disease. Patients who show elevated levels of the protein are at a higher risk for heart disease, Dr. Aaron says.

THE 64-SLICE SCAN

“A stress test tells us what happens to the blood flow when the heart is under stress. But a stress test can’t tell us if you have plaque. The 64-slice scan can, and then you can do something about the plaque,” Dr. Hollywood says. Dr. Aaron adds, “The latest multislice coronary CT scans let you see pictures of the heart at different angles to see if there are any blockages.”

Dr. Aaron, who practices preventative, non-invasive, and nuclear cardiology, says he first learns a patient’s family history and then takes blood tests to see if there are risk factors. If there are, he orders a stress test. Depending on the results, he might order nuclear tests and a multislice coronary scan.