

The Number One Killer in Women

By: *The Heart Foundation*



Hands up those of you who think men are generally healthier than women, particularly when it comes to heart disease? Interestingly, there's the perception that men are more unhealthy than women **yet the stats on heart disease are very similar.**

To give you an idea on just how similar the stats are for men and women, in 2010 10,000 women died of heart disease (compared to 11,700 men), a difference of 1,700. For heart attack specifically 4,900 women died of heart attack in 2010 (compared to 5,000 men), a difference of only 100. Not only that but research shows that women are more likely than men to have a heart attack without chest pain, according to new research published in the Journal of the American Medical Association. In the study involving more than a million heart attack patients, researchers observed that 40% of women arrived at the Emergency Department without chest pain compared to 30% of men.

So why is this?

It's a question to all you women out there. Where do you fit in on the priority list in your household? First? Somewhere in the middle, or right down at the bottom?

It's not uncommon to hear women putting themselves last on the priorities list. And while most women know they should attend to their own needs better, in the midst of juggling work, family and housework, many women just can't see a way out. It's just one reason why the vague symptoms of a heart attack such as back pain, nausea and fatigue are often ignored. Women simply soldier on when they feel sick and brush their symptoms off as unimportant. They are simply too busy looking after more 'seemingly' important things.

Given this information it should come as no surprise that more than two thirds of women who have high cholesterol and high blood pressure (risk factors for heart disease) mistakenly rate their health as good to excellent. We know that having high blood pressure or cholesterol significantly increases your risk of heart disease, but these silent killers are often overlooked, according to new research from the National Heart Foundation of Australia. One of the best ways for women to reduce their risk of heart disease is to put themselves first and focus on their own health. Here's how:

1) Regularly (at least once a year) test for high blood pressure and elevated cholesterol.

Why? Many of us go years without getting a blood test however risk factors like high blood pressure and high cholesterol significantly increase your chance of developing it," says Dr Lyn Roberts, National CEO of the Heart Foundation. High blood pressure and cholesterol are often called the silent killers as there are no obvious symptoms - having a heart attack can be the first sign. The only way to find out if you're at risk is to get your blood pressure and cholesterol checked.

2) Change your diet

Everyone knows that it's important to eat a balanced diet and be active, but many of us struggle to achieve this healthier lifestyle. Australians - and women in particular - are constantly being bombarded with information on how to be healthy, but so much of it gets dumped in the 'too hard basket' because it is complicated, confusing or contradictory.

However, many people find that by making some simple changes to their diets they can make amazing changes to reduce high blood pressure and high cholesterol. For example cutting out processed meats that are high in sodium and unhealthy fats such as salami, ham and bacon and replacing with low-sodium, omega-3 rich sardines and salmon can help with high blood pressure. Cutting out caffeine also helps to reduce their blood pressure. For more ideas you might also like to check out our videos called [Swap that for this](#). They are a great example of how to make healthier versions of some of our more unhealthy favourite meals such as fish & chips, banana cake, apple pie and even a hamburger with the lot! The great thing about "swapping that for this" is that you don't have to draw upon an enormous amount of discipline and go without entirely; you just need to make some healthier swaps.

3) Lose weight if you're overweight

Nearly one in two Generation X women are now overweight or obese, according to a Heart Foundation survey, and thus face a higher risk of heart disease as a result. The Heart Foundation surveyed more than 2,500 women aged 30-44 about their height and weight, and found that 49% of participants self-reported height and weight measurements that gave them a body mass index (BMI) in the overweight (25 - 29.9), or obese (greater than 30) range.

4) Find time to exercise even if you don't have time to exercise

Physical inactivity can increase your chance of heart disease. Given that many of us live much more sedentary lives than our ancestors try and be as active as you can. One of my girlfriends lowered her high cholesterol down to normal just by walking everyday for 30 minutes. Take the stairs instead of the lift or leave the car if you are going anywhere within walking distance and walk instead. The reality is that small, easy changes really do add up to make a big difference to your health.

Lastly, remember, many people think that heart disease only affects older men, but in reality heart disease is the number one killer of Australian women. Heart attacks kill almost exactly the same number of women as men in Australia so The Heart Foundation is urging women to learn more about their heart disease risk at [Go red for women](#). The Heart Foundation are offering a free, six week Healthy Heart Challenge this year as part of their annual Go Red for Women campaign. Registrations for the 2012 Healthy Heart Challenge open on 1 May at [Go red for women](#) and the Challenge starts on Monday 4 June, running till mid July.

Participants can select one of four goals:

- Be active everyday
- Improve everyday nutrition
- Lower high blood pressure
- Lower high cholesterol levels

Participants will receive a link to personalised online tools to track their progress as well as weekly eNewsletters with tips, recipes, personal stories and information to help keep them motivated and achieve their goal, as well as the opportunity to win some great prizes courtesy of generous sponsors. Get together with a friend, relative or colleague, sign up for the Healthy Heart Challenge and take the first steps towards better heart health.

Have you had high cholesterol or high blood pressure? What diet and lifestyle changes did you find the most useful? Share your tips here with our readers.

