

# Nutrition Matters

## Women and Heart Disease

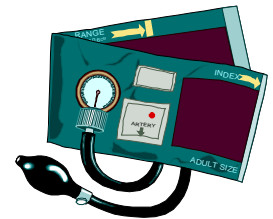
“It started right after the holidays last year,” recounts Marian. “I hadn’t been feeling well for a few days. I was tired, I ached, my chest felt tight and I felt sick to my stomach. Thinking that I had the flu and that the fresh air would do me good I walked up to the neighbourhood clinic. They were suspicious of my heart, so I was sent immediately to the hospital where they confirmed I had suffered a mild heart attack. Later I was diagnosed with angina. It never occurred to me that I might be at risk for heart disease. I’ve always been healthy. In fact, I’ve worried more about my husband. He smoked for years, watches a lot more sports than he plays these days and usually snacks on chips or peanuts while he sits in front of the television.”

Marian’s story is not unusual. Traditionally thought of as a “man’s disease”, heart disease is the number one cause of premature death among Canadian women. Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is a broad term used to describe diseases of the heart and blood vessels. The most common type is atherosclerosis, or, hardening of the arteries. When everything is working properly the blood flows freely through the body’s vessels, but in the case of atherosclerosis, blood cholesterol is deposited on the walls of arteries. Fatty deposits, or plaque, build up around the inside of the artery. Eventually, the artery may become so narrow that blood cannot get through. In some cases, the rough surface of

plaque causes blood clots to form which can also block the flow of blood. Either case may result in a heart attack or stroke.

Before menopause, the hormone estrogen, which is produced in a woman’s body, provides some protection from heart disease by helping to control blood cholesterol levels. However, at the time of menopause, when estrogen levels begin to drop, women no longer have that protection. At that point the same factors that put men at risk for heart disease also affect women. They are:

- high blood cholesterol
- smoking
- high blood pressure
- lack of physical activity
- diabetes



As Marian learned through her experience, women seldom experience the well known symptom of crushing chest pain. Instead, they are more likely to describe vague chest pain, fatigue, shortness of breath, neck, shoulder, arm or back pain and/or nausea. These early signs are easy to miss and women are less likely to get them checked out.

To prevent heart disease, women, like men, need to be aware of the factors that put them at risk and make the necessary changes.

**Here are some tips for a heart healthy lifestyle:**

- ✓ If you smoke, quit or cut down. Risk decreases sharply in the first year and returns to that of a non-smoker in seven years.
- ✓ If you are over the age of 35, be aware that smoking combined with birth control pills increases the risk for heart disease even more. Talk to your doctor about alternative methods of birth control.
- ✓ Be physically active everyday. It's a great way to relieve stress and keep your weight in a healthy range. Contact your local Public Health office for a copy of *Canada's Physical Activity Guide to Healthy Active Living*.
- ✓ Have your blood pressure checked regularly.
- ✓ Reduce your overall fat intake, especially saturated fat. These fats are found mainly in animal sources such as meat, poultry, eggs and milk products. They tend to raise blood cholesterol levels.
- ✓ Choose higher fibre foods such as whole grains, vegetables and fruit. Contact your local Public Health office for a copy of *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating*.



**Here are some hints on how to cut down on fat and boost your fibre intake:**

- Eat a variety of foods prepared in different ways. This helps you get all the nutrients you need without getting too much fat or salt.
- Look for milk, yogourt and cottage cheese that says 2% or less M.F. (Milk Fat) or B.F. (Butter Fat) on the label.
- Try the new varieties of lower fat cheeses with 20% or less M.F.
- Limit serving sizes of meat, fish and poultry to the size of a deck of cards once cooked.
- Use jam instead of butter or margarine on toast. Spread mustard, salsa or some low fat mayonnaise on sandwiches.
- Use milk in your coffee instead of cream.
- Snack on pretzels, pita puffs or low fat microwave popcorn.
- In restaurants, look for menu items that have been grilled instead of breaded or deep fried.
- When everyone goes out for ice-cream choose frozen yogourt or sherbet, or have the child size scoop of the gourmet-style ice-cream.
- Eat more legumes. Beans, peas, chick peas and lentils are full of fibre and low in fat.
- Have at least two fruits and/or vegetables with every meal.

