

# How To Keep Your Heart Healthy

By Dan Markham

For many folks, a healthy heart is not a given. It requires a daily plan that includes diet, exercise and intelligent choices.

While everyone is susceptible to heart disease, there are legions of people for whom the condition is a great possibility. It is particularly important for these high-risk candidates to carefully monitor their health.

Women are particularly vulnerable, reports the American Heart Association.

“This year, we discovered an alarming fact. Women still don’t identify heart disease as a personal threat to them, even though they know that heart disease is the Number one killer of women,” said Alice Jacobs, M.D., president of the American Heart Association, in a release. The AHA has made efforts to combat that perception with its Go Red For Women Initiative, a program designed to raise awareness of women’s high risk for heart disease.

Among the conditions that are more likely to trigger heart disease, according to Dr. Michael Ball, the director of cardiac cath labs at the Heart Center of Indiana Care Group, are people with hypertension, diabetes, a family history of coronary disease and the obese. Smokers are also a high risk for heart disease.

AHA statistics reveal that women are more likely to suffer many of these high-risk symptoms than men. High-risk candidates can severely limit the onset of heart disease or stroke by recognizing their existence. “The early recognition of risk factors, and follow-up visits with physicians, has been shown to increase life span,” says Ball.

Once a high-risk patient is identified, several steps are taken to lessen the likelihood of the onset of heart disease.

The first step is a healthy diet. A diet that emphasizes a variety of fruits, vegetables, grains, low fat or non fat dairy products, fish, legumes and sources of protein low in saturated fat (poultry, lean meats and plant sources, for example).

The AHA recommends strict guidelines on the intake of cholesterol. For low-risk patients, the goal is to keep LDL (bad cholesterol) at less than 160 mg daily. The total drops to 130 mg daily for intermediate risk patients and 100 mg daily for high-risk patients, including people with heart disease or diabetes.

Instead, nearly 50 percent of Americans have total blood cholesterol levels at 240 mg daily. This problem is compounded when the HDL (good cholesterol) levels are below 40 mg. Ball recommends regular screening for cholesterol, blood pressure to remain aware of your risk status.

Complementing a healthy, balanced diet is a daily routine of exercise. “The old recommendation was three times a week of cardiovascular exercise,” Ball says. “Now it’s seven days a week of some kind of exercise.”

The nature of the exercise is largely immaterial. Activities such as swimming, biking, aerobic dancing, jogging and skiing are beneficial to the heart. A simple program of walking is also sufficient.

However, there are numerous ways to benefit your heart even if you can’t set aside 30 minutes per day to physical activity.

Among the activities suggested by the AHA include doing housework instead of hiring someone, doing yard work, parking farther from the shopping mall and walking the extra distance, taking the stairs instead of the elevator, standing or walking while on the telephone and walking while playing golf instead of taking a cart.

If lifestyle modifications aren’t enough to combat heart disease, some medications can be used to deter its onset, Ball says. Doctor’s may recommend ACE Inhibitors, ARB Agents and statin drugs as a course of treatment.

In any event, high-risk patients must maintain regular contact with physicians to prevent the disease. “Years ago, cardiovascular specialists didn’t hear about them as patients until they had their first heart attack,” Ball said, noting that 70 percent of those patients died as a result. “If we can recognize these people at a younger age, we can treat it,” he says.