Risk of Heart Disease

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Menopause and Heart Disease

For many women, heart disease symptoms surface after the onset of menopause. In fact, cardiovascular disease accounts for nearly 50% of deaths among women over 50, and the overall chance of heart attack increases roughly 10 years after menopause.

But menopause doesn't have to mean the end of heart health. In fact, there are a number of ways you can counter the risk factors, and enjoy a more active, comfortable, and worry-free lifestyle for many years to come.

The Connection between Menopause and Heart Disease

Menopause is not a disease, and it doesn't cause heart disease. However, certain biological changes that come with menopause are likely to blame for the rising risk of cardiovascular conditions.

- **Estrogen levels fall**. One of the major events after menopause is a permanent decline in estrogen, and that hormonal shift may leave the heart more vulnerable to disease. Estrogen can help keep blood vessels flexible, which means they can easily expand and contract to control blood flow. It follows that less estrogen could mean less blood vessel flexibility – and disrupted blood flow – within the heart.
- **Blood chemistry changes**. Your cardiovascular health depends on the right ratios of cholesterol and fat in your blood, but menopause may throw off that balance. LDL (bad) cholesterol tends to rise, HDL (good) cholesterol levels begin to decline, and the family of fats known as triglycerides can build up in the blood. The more dangerous fat that collects in the blood, the higher your risk for heart problems.
- **Blood pressure rises.** For many women, high blood pressure becomes a concern after menopause. The reason for the increase isn't totally clear, but experts suspect that both hormonal chances and a general increase in body mass index (BMI) each play a role when it comes to blood pressure changes during menopause.

Determining Your Risk Level

Although your chances of developing heart disease increase after menopause, not all women will face the same degree of risk. A lot will depend on your stage in life and degree of fitness, coupled with your daily habits:

- **Age**. After age 50, your risk of heart disease increases. However, if you go through menopause later (in fact, the average age for the onset of menopause is 54), your risk of heart disease may not increase right at age 50.
- **Diet**. Since body mass index is thought to contribute to heart disease risk, an unhealthy diet that leads to an unhealthy waistline can be a major trigger for disease. Obesity is also linked to diabetes and high blood pressure – two more prime risk factors for heart attack, heart failure, and stroke
- **Smoking.** Tobacco use has devastating effects on your cardiovascular health, from lower levels of good cholesterol in your blood to a significant increase in blood clots. Smoking can even bring on early

menopause, which translates to a higher risk of heart disease for more years of your life.
- **Family history.** As is the case with many diseases, heart disease risk is at least partly genetic. If any immediate family members have suffered from heart attacks or strokes, your genes may be increase your own risk of developing cardiovascular problems, but you'll need to work with your doctor to find out. Since you can't do anything about your genetics, you must make changes to your environment in order to lower your risk.

Next page: tips to reduce your heart disease risk.

Tips to Reduce your Heart Disease Risk

Although it may seem like the odds are against you, there are plenty of ways to reduce your risk of heart disease after menopause. You've likely heard that a good diet and regular exercise are helpful in the fight against disease, but do you know what kind (and how much) will bring the greatest benefit? There are a few specific ways to see a more positive impact.

First, get familiar with your numbers. Vague pledges to eat "healthier", workout "more often", and "cut down" on unhealthy habits can set you up for disappointment. Without clear targets, it's much easier to stray from your plan, so use solid, measurable goals from the very start.

- **BMI.** It's not a perfect measurement of health, but experts agree that your body mass index is an important number when it comes to assessing your disease risk. Your own personal BMI is determined by your age, gender, height and weight. After age 50, the normal BMI range for women is between 28 and 29; a BMI of 27 to 28 is more appropriate for women 60 and over.
- **Number on the scale**. The more weight you carry, the harder your heart has to work to pump blood to your tissues, and that can wear it out. Talk to your doctor about the right weight for your height and frame, and be sure to weigh yourself regularly in order to stay on track.
  The key is to monitor your weight without obsessing over small fluctuations. Remember things like water retention, stress, sleep, and heat can send the number on the scale up or down, so be reasonable in your expectations and stay focused on the end goal.

- **Minutes of exercise**. Experts suggest that women get 150 minutes of physical activity each week to lower their risk of heart disease, but if you need to shed a few pounds, you probably need to increase that number. Also, be sure you spread out your exercise time over the course of the week – squeezing several days' worth into a single weekend is a recipe for injury, and your body won't reap the same rewards.
- **Healthy servings.** Once you've determined a healthy caloric goal for you (2000 calories a day is reasonable for weight maintenance), divide them up *before* you sit down to meals. First, get used to what 100 or 200 calories looks like for various ingredients, and then find ways to fit in 4.5 cups of veggies and fruits, six servings of whole grains, and two to three servings of lean protein each day.
  A dietary change is often the easiest first step to better heart health, and it may give you the energy to handle other menopausal discomforts, too. Some women find they develop an intolerance to certain foods around perimenopause, and a switch to a healthier menu brings more comfort and less weight gain, along with better heart health.