

A Healthy Heart

Lifestyle Changes You Need to Make

By Travis Walters, M.D.

IF YOU ASK MOST WOMEN what disease they fear most, a resounding 25 percent would say cancer, with most specifying breast cancer. However, breast cancer did not come close to being the top killer of American women in 2004 (the most recent year with compiled data). That number one killer is in fact heart disease, killing 331,000 women. Another cardiovascular disease, stroke, followed at number two with 91,000 deaths; lung cancer caused 68,000 deaths; and breast cancer came in at number six with 41,000 deaths (behind even Alzheimer's Disease). To put it in better perspective, 1 woman dies every 2 minutes from heart disease. Everyone knows that breast cancer strikes 1 in 8 women, but did you know that 1 in 3 female adults has some form of cardiovascular disease? And for the past 25 years, the number of female deaths from cardiovascular disease has exceeded those for males. So why the disconnect between fear and fact? Is it ignorance? Denial? The busyness of life that aids in ignoring the warning signs? Those possibilities are up for debate but the consequences can be life-changing and severe, not only for mothers and fathers but also for their children.

One woman dies every two minutes from heart disease.



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Why Health Is Important

As parents take care of their newborn infants, most quickly realize that if they are not healthy themselves, their children cannot receive the best care. If mothers are not physically, mentally, and emotionally energized, care and decision-making for their newborn will suffer. Maternal rest in those first few weeks is paramount. But it does not stop there. As children grow, mature, and experience the world around them, they require parental involvement and guidance to help equip them for the outside world, to supply them with the roots and wings to take flight as they leave home and venture out into the "real world." This necessitates parents with healthy lifestyles to make family and life productive and to fulfill God's plan for their lives. Not only that, but kids learn from parents every day and emulate the actions they see. They observe, discern, and incorporate what they witness into their own lives.

Take Stock

So what can you do? To improve your influence on your child and to maximize the short time you have with her before she becomes an adult, begin by taking an inventory of your current lifestyle and family history. Those with a family history of heart attacks, strokes, and other cardiovascular diseases are at increased risk. While you cannot control this genetic predisposition nor your age, gender, and ethnicity, you can make some important lifestyle choices.

PEDIATRIC OBESITY

- **Control your blood pressure.** All adults should have their blood pressure checked regularly. It is easy and noninvasive. High blood pressure is considered 140/90 mmHg and above, with prehypertension defined as 120-139/80-89 mmHg.

- **Control blood cholesterol.** Adults should have their total cholesterol checked at least once every five years, along with a lipoprotein profile which shows a more specific breakdown of your total cholesterol.

- **Stop smoking.** Smoking is a major risk factor for heart disease, and the subsequent risk for a heart attack decreases soon after quitting.

- **Control diabetes.** Aiming for a hemoglobin A1C less than seven percent reduces the risk of diabetes.

- **Sustain a healthy weight.** Individuals should target a body mass index (BMI) of 18.5 to 24.9; this number helps to quantify the relationship between your weight and height.

- **Exercise regularly.** Everyone in normal health should strive for at least 30 minutes per day of moderate physical activity, four to six days per week.

- **Maintain a healthy diet.** Keep fat calories to less than 30 percent of your total calories and avoid saturated fats. A diet that contains a healthy balance of fruits, vegetables, grains, fish, poultry, and lean meat is best.

By choosing to make these changes, you not only will improve your own health, but you also will become a healthy role model for your child. Further, in desiring to be like you, your child will incorporate these goals and better her own life. □

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov/cancer/breast/statistics. American Heart Association, www.americanheart.org/downloadable/heart/1199816973854FS10WMO8.pdf.

Being overweight and obese is already a silent epidemic in children and adolescents. Data from 2004 shows the prevalence of overweight children at 14 percent in kids aged 2 to 5 years, 19 percent for those 6 to 11 years old, and 17.5 percent for teenagers. The statistics are up from 5 to 6.5 percent in the late 1970s. Obesity carries with it higher risks for other conditions that in turn will increase the risk for cardiovascular disease. Among these are high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and type 2 diabetes. Almost 60 percent of overweight children had at least one risk factor while 25 percent had two or more. Additional complications include asthma, fatty degeneration of the liver, and sleep apnea. This does not include an even more profound immediate consequence that's not physical – the psychosocial impact of social discrimination that leads to lower self-esteem, which hinders academic and social functioning.

Source: American Academy of Pediatrics, Overweight and Obesity, <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity/childhood/index.htm>.



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ONLINE RESOURCES FOR PARENTS AND FAMILIES

For more information on pediatric obesity, visit the American Academy of Pediatrics at www.aap.org/obesity. You will find helpful news on the organization's policy and guidelines, tips on prevention, and health and economic consequences.

In addition, the American Heart Association (AHA) has a Web site, www.heartcheckmark.org, which helps you easily and reliably find heart-healthy foods that are certified by the AHA. It also has a user-friendly "My Grocery List" section to make preparation painless.