



Wellness Monthly

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

February 2016

Preventing a heart attack (even if you've already had one)

Valentine's Day may bring thoughts of love and romance, but it's also American Heart Month. And as Dr. Tracy Stevens says, "There's nothing sexy about heart disease." Dr. Stevens is national spokesperson for the American Heart Association (AHA) and a cardiologist at Saint Luke's Mid America Heart Institute in Kansas City, Missouri.

Reducing your risk

Dr. Stevens describes the condition that leads to a heart attack as "coronary artery acne": risk factors such as an unhealthy diet, lack of exercise and smoking lead to plaque in the coronary arteries that becomes inflamed. When the plaque gets inflamed, it ruptures.

"When plaque ruptures inside your coronary artery, your body sees that as a cut. It sends the clot troops to heal that rupture." It's not the plaque or the rupture. For most individuals, "it's the clot that obstructs the blood flow and triggers a heart attack."

According to Dr. Stevens, most heart attacks are preventable. "There's nothing magic about preventing heart disease. It's just being on top of the risk factors." Nicotine, uncontrolled diabetes, high cholesterol and blood pressure are the biggest risk factors that you can control. This means eating healthier, staying active, and for smokers, quitting. It also means managing conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure and hyperlipidemia.

Think of food as medicine

"In America, our bellies are warehouses for food our bodies don't know what to do with," says Dr. Stevens. Choose a variety of fruits and vegetables — foods without nutrition labels — over foods with high-fat, salt and sugar content. In addition to fruits and vegetables, the AHA recommends eating a balanced

diet of whole grains, low-fat dairy products, and poultry, fish and nuts. Dr. Stevens adds, "If you want to eat meat, make sure it's lean meat."¹

Start counting your steps

For most people, even those with heart problems, being physically active is safe. In fact, it can help treat heart disease. Talk with your doctor about what's right for you. With your doctor's OK, an easy way to get started is by getting a pedometer and counting your steps. The American Heart Association recommends 10,000 steps a day. To get to that level, every week try to increase your daily step count by 1,000 steps.²

Get a blood pressure cuff — and use it

"Every home should have a blood pressure cuff," says Dr. Stevens. "Hypertension is the leading cause of stroke, blindness, heart attack, heart failure, kidney failure and sexual dysfunction in men. And one in three Americans will have high blood pressure. It's a silent killer." She compares the condition to a balloon being filled with air. When the pressure gets too high, the balloon pops. "The pop is the stroke, the blindness,

Signs of a heart attack³

Some heart attacks happen suddenly, without warning. But some start slowly, so a person may not know what's happening. Symptoms may be mild, and may include:

- Chest pain, pressure or discomfort that lasts more than 5 minutes, or goes away and comes back
- Pain or discomfort in other areas of the upper body, such as in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach
- Shortness of breath, with or without chest pain
- Breaking out in a cold sweat
- Nausea or feeling lightheaded

If you have any of these symptoms, don't wait. Call 9-1-1 immediately.

While chest pain is the most common symptom of a heart attack in men and women, not everyone will experience it. Women, older people and those with diabetes are more likely to be among those who may not have chest pain. Even if you're not sure you're having a heart attack, it's important to get help quickly.

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the heart attack. You don't want to wait until it pops, and the only way you're going to know you have high blood pressure is if you check it regularly."

Preventing a second heart attack

In the U.S., about 720,000 people have a heart attack each year. For 205,000 of them, it's not their first.⁴ To help prevent a second (or third) heart attack, the AHA offers the following guidelines:⁵

- Stop smoking and avoid being exposed to tobacco smoke
- Get at least 30 minutes of exercise 5–7 days a week
- Reduce weight if you are overweight, obese, or have a large waist
- Get a flu shot every year
- Take low-dose aspirin daily unless your doctor prescribes a higher dose or recommends against it

Here are a few other things you can do.

Get screened for depression

Depression is three times more common for someone who's had a heart attack. It also increases the chances of having another one. Don't be afraid to talk with your doctor about your feelings. Depression can be treated.⁶ On the other hand, Dr. Stevens says not treating depression is equivalent to ignoring diabetes, high cholesterol or high blood pressure.

Attend cardiac rehabilitation

Cardiac rehab can help reduce the risk of a future cardiac event by stabilizing, slowing or even reversing the progression of heart disease. Yet less than one in three heart attack survivors attend cardiac rehab.⁷ Women and minorities are even less likely to attend cardiac rehab. Dr. Stevens says women often feel they don't have time due to family and work responsibilities. But cardiac rehab not only reduces the risk of

death by 20–30%. According to Dr. Stevens, it helps "to get your sea legs back, to give you the confidence, get more education, but also to feel you're not alone."

Lean on your social supports

Multiple studies have shown that lack of a social support after a heart attack can lead to poorer health, lower quality of life and depression. It's important to have people you can talk to, to share your concerns and get support. In response, the American Heart Association created the AHA Support network at <http://supportnetwork.heart.org/home>, an online community for those dealing with a heart or stroke issue.

One more concern heart patients may have is when it's ok to have sex again. "They think about it, but don't know how to ask," says Dr. Stevens. Don't be shy about talking with your doctor about sexual problems or when it might be safe to resume sexual activity.

Resources

www.liveandworkwell.com

Visit liveandworkwell.com to find articles, tips and tools to help you reduce your risk for heart disease. In the Be Well section, check out the resource page for Heart Disease & Circulatory Disorders.

Ask your health benefits representative for your access code to liveandworkwell.com.

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