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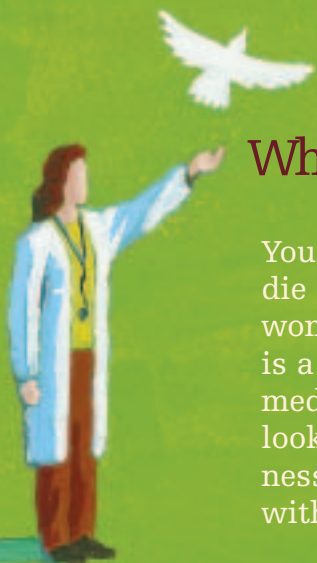
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*Women and Heart Disease:*

## What They Need **You** to Tell **Them**— A Physician's Guide





## What They Need You to Tell Them

You know that 1 in 2 American women will die of heart disease or stroke,<sup>1</sup> but too many women today still believe that heart disease is a man's disease. Even in this era of on-line medical information, your patients ultimately look to you for guidance. Help increase awareness by starting this important conversation with your patients.

### The Knowledge Gap

- ▶ Only **54%** of women are aware that heart disease is their #1 killer.<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ **84%** of women admit having 1 or more risk factors for heart disease (**42%** have 3 or more), yet only **31%** feel that they are personally at risk.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ **80%** of women say they have been screened for heart disease, but only **30%** say their doctor started a conversation about their risks, and only **26%** started the conversation themselves.<sup>4</sup>

### Talking to Your Female Patients About Heart Disease

- ▶ **Help them understand their risks and the need for action now.** Many women are concerned about heart disease impacting the men in their lives, but feel that they don't need to be aware of their own heart health—especially if they are younger. Help them understand why they need to take action NOW and emphasize how serious the consequences will be if they wait too long to make important lifestyle changes.
- ▶ **Understand your patients' motivations and fears about heart disease.** When it comes to health, most women are motivated by the desire to remain independent and able to care for themselves and their loved ones. Make sure that your patients understand the impact that heart disease can have on their quality of life.

<sup>1</sup> National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. *The Healthy Heart Handbook for Women*. 2005.

<sup>2</sup> National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. *New Lifetime Poll Shows More Than Half Of Women Know Heart Disease Is Their #1 Killer, Yet Only One In Three Believe They Are Personally At Risk*. February 1, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> The National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease. *Women and Heart Disease Fact Sheet*.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

- ▶ **Teach them about the different types of cardiovascular disease and their symptoms.** When people talk about heart disease, most are referring to heart attacks. Teach your patients that cardiovascular disease is more than heart attacks and includes angina, valvular heart disease, arrhythmias, congestive heart failure, stroke, aneurysm, arteriosclerosis, and high blood pressure. Make sure they understand the risks and manifestations of all cardiovascular diseases.
- ▶ **Explain the different screening and diagnostic tests.** Diagnosing and screening for risk factors can involve a battery of tests that are often overwhelming and confusing for your patient. Walk them through the tests that you are going to perform and explain what they will tell you about their heart health.
- ▶ **Explain the results and their implications.** Not only are the tests overwhelming, but the results can be even more confusing. Explain what the results mean in terms that are understandable. Tell them what you have learned from the tests, the impact the results should have on their lives, and how you hope to see the results change with future tests. Help them turn their results into action plans for healthy hearts.
- ▶ **Promote treatment compliance by teaching your patients about their medications.** If your patients need medication, tell them how to take it, what to expect in terms of side effects, and most importantly—why it's necessary. Motivate them to take medication by explaining how it will help. Also, be sure to reassess compliance at follow-up visits.
- ▶ **Help your patients make lifestyle changes a priority.** Empower your patients to take control of their heart health. Emphasize what an impact lifestyle changes can make on heart health and risk. Provide them with resources for getting additional information and support, such as the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute's *The Heart Truth* campaign—[www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/hearttruth](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/hearttruth).

### The Gender Gap

- ▶ Women wait longer than men to seek help when having a heart attack or stroke.
- ▶ 38% of female heart attack survivors, compared to only 18% of male heart attack survivors, will have another heart attack within 6 years.<sup>5</sup>
- ▶ Women are twice as likely as men to be disabled by heart failure within 6 years.<sup>6</sup>
- ▶ Because they get heart disease later in life, women are more likely to have comorbidities—often masking symptoms and complicating treatment.
- ▶ Women tend to have smaller blood vessels that are harder to keep open.
- ▶ Symptoms for heart attack, stroke, and other cardiovascular diseases can be significantly different in women.