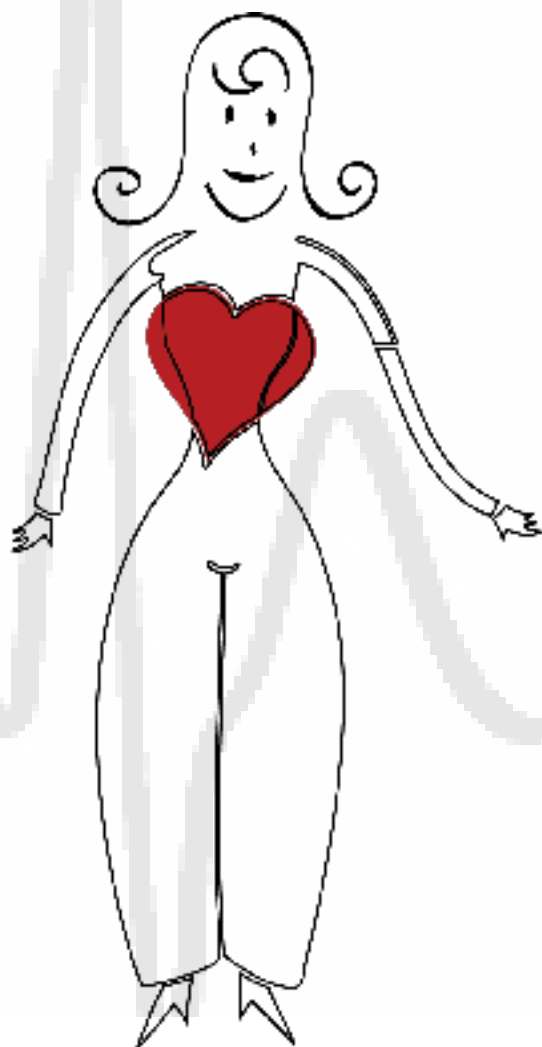


## The Heart of the Matter

It's time to get smart and take seriously the disease that could affect your life.

BY KARA DOUGLASS THOM



Don't ignore the statistics: heart disease is the number one cause of death for women. But as an active, fit, health-seeking woman, the statistics can't apply to you, right? After all, the risk factors—diabetes, obesity, high cholesterol and blood pressure, being inactive and a smoker—that can clog up coronary arteries so that blood doesn't get to or from the heart aren't on your radar of healthy living. But you still could be at risk. And the fact that you don't fit the mold of a walking heart attack increases the odds that a physician might pooh-pooh the possibility of your having heart disease.

That's exactly what happened to Lori Kupetz, 39, of Sherman Oaks, California, after she experienced chest pains during a hike with a friend. Her doctors dismissed heart disease—even standard test results were negative—in this active, slender, non-smoking vegetarian. She bounced around from doctor to doctor for a year, all while suffering increasingly debilitating chest pains.

"I kept pressing it with the doctors, but they kept telling me it wasn't my heart," Lori says. "Had I been a 40-year-old man in a high-stress job, they would have thought, yeah, he's going to have a heart attack. They took a look at me and just thought I was anxious."

Just in time she sought a second opinion at a women's heart clinic. If Lori was anxious, she had good reason: it took emergency triple-bypass surgery to repair three blocked arteries, one of which was completely shut down.

As Lori learned, sometimes inherited and often stealth circumstances affect the quality of a woman's heart. "I have had high cholesterol since my twenties, but I've been on medication since then, so I was always under the assumption I was okay," Lori says.

If your parents have heart disease or other family members have died too young from heart attack or stroke, you too are more vulnerable. Their heart disease could likely have been caused by a predisposition to high cholesterol (as was the case for Lori), high blood pressure, or diabetes, which raises the stakes for keeping track of your own numbers. Regardless of family history, it is recommended that all women get their cholesterol checked by age 20.

Race is another factor. African Americans are more likely than Whites to have heart disease. Mexican Americans, American Indians, and native Hawaiians suffer disproportionately, too, but that could be due to higher rates of obesity and diabetes.

“We are not all created equal, and some people, despite exercise and a healthy lifestyle, may have inherited a genetic short straw,” says Casey Chaney, PhD, an associate professor of physical therapy at Western University of Health Sciences in Pasadena, California, with a special interest in exercise as it relates to heart health. “Additionally, environmental factors, like the air we breathe, may play havoc even with those of us who take good care of ourselves.”

## The fact that you don't fit the mold of a walking heart attack increases the odds that a physician might pooh-pooh the possibility of your having heart disease.

Chaney adds that another inevitable factor is age. “Our biologic clocks are ticking, and not at the same rate.” The age at which you hit menopause puts you in heart disease prime time. The medical community can't agree whether the true culprit is the hormonal effects of menopause or good old-fashioned aging, which is typically accompanied by a slower pace and more body weight, leading down the slippery slope to heart disease.


Stress also contributes to heart disease, but the real culprit may be how we handle stress. If you drink too much, turn to a smoke, or eat to calm your nerves, these behaviors—not necessarily the stress—can put the squeeze on your coronary arteries. And while most of us take to the outdoors to dissipate the ugly effects of stress, it's possible that shimmying up the side of a cliff or whatever thrill-seeking adventure you take to isn't as “calming” as it seems.

What's a healthy gal to do?

First realize that there may be things you aren't doing. “If we look at women in the United States, only 10 percent are taking all the steps they need to be,” says C. Noel Bairey Merz, MD, a cardiologist who specializes in women's health and heart disease at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. “People think they're doing things right but often are missing one, two, or three things.”

Bairey Merz says that there are five health habits that can lower a woman's lifetime risk for heart disease to less than 10 percent:

1. Don't smoke.
2. Exercise briskly for 30 minutes every day.
3. Maintain your ideal body weight. (Realize that being too thin can be as much of a problem as obesity. Anorexia nervosa and bulimia can damage the heart, too.)
4. Eat a low-fat diet brimming with fresh fruits and vegetables—which contain the vitamins and minerals that support a healthy heart—and whole grains, which help lower blood cholesterol.
5. Drink one serving of alcohol every day. (This is the best news yet—but hold on! That's only one 12-ounce beer, 4 ounces of wine, or 1 ounce of 80- to 100-proof spirits.)

Bairey Merz cautions that this is still not a guarantee. “Even people who do everything right still have a 10 percent risk. But getting that risk down to 10 percent is great, especially if it's by doing things that are pretty easy to do.” 

## Heart Health Boosters

The following measures aren't proven to prevent heart disease, but they are recommended for people who already have heart disease. If you believe that your risk is greater than average, they're worth getting in the habit of doing.

### MEDITATE.

Heart disease patients who practiced transcendental meditation for 16 weeks reduced their blood pressure, blood sugar, and blood insulin and improved heart regulation, which lowers the risk of sudden death from a heart attack.

### EAT FISH TWICE A WEEK.

Omega-3 fatty acids found in oily fish lower the risk of fatal heart rhythm disturbances, and patients with heart disease often take supplements prescribed by their doctor.

### EXERCISE AN HOUR EVERY DAY.

“Good control studies show that if you have heart disease, you get optimal benefit from exercising 60 minutes every day,” says Bairey Merz.

### CONSIDER TAKING BABY ASPIRIN.

Bairey Merz says that results from the Nurses Health Study found that 81 milligrams of aspirin taken daily prevents a first stroke in women of all ages and a first heart attack in women older than 65. Check with your healthcare provider first because it still carries risks along with the benefits.

### TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS.

If you see a physician who rules out heart disease, don't be afraid to seek a second opinion if common sense tells you that that's what's wrong with you. “Medical physicians are not infallible,” says Bairey Merz, adding, “Women can seek out a woman's heart center, where we use tests we know work better for women.”