

## Heart Health and Women

### What is cardiovascular disease?

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is a disease of the heart or major blood vessels (arteries) that supply the heart, brain and other vital organs. It is caused by a gradual clogging of these arteries and can lead to heart attack and stroke. CVD is the number one killer of both men and women in Australia, accounting for approximately 33 per cent of all deaths.

### Australian women and cardiovascular disease

- women are about four times more likely to die of heart disease than breast cancer
- heart disease is the leading cause of death in women
- only 31 per cent of women are aware that heart disease is the leading cause of death
- CVD is responsible for more than 25 per cent of premature deaths in women
- 90 per cent of women have at least one risk factor for heart disease
- 50 per cent of women have 2-3 risk factors for heart disease
- the number of heart attack deaths is the same for both men and women
- the risk of developing heart disease increases significantly after menopause
- almost 50 per cent of women have a high blood cholesterol level

### *Atherosclerosis*

Atherosclerosis is a condition where fatty deposits called 'plaque' or 'atheroma' gradually build up on the inner walls of arteries. Over time, this causes a narrowing of the arteries, resulting in reduced blood flow to the heart and other vital organs. Plaque can break apart at any time and cause blood clots to form, blocking the artery. A blockage of blood supply can lead to serious cardiovascular conditions, such as chest pain (angina), heart attack and stroke. Atherosclerosis can begin when you are young and be well advanced by middle age.

### *Heart attack*

A heart attack occurs when a coronary artery becomes completely blocked, and stops blood flow to part of the heart muscle. The part of the heart muscle that is deprived of its blood supply starts to die. Symptoms include tightness, pressure, heaviness or pain in the chest, neck, jaw, shoulder/s, back or arm/s. A person may also feel short of breath, nauseous, dizzy or light-headed and/or sweaty. A heart attack is a medical emergency. If you think you or someone else is having a heart attack, call triple zero (000) immediately and ask for an ambulance.

### *Stroke*

A stroke is the blockage or bursting of a blood vessel that supplies blood to a part of the brain, which reduces or interrupts blood flow. Symptoms of a stroke depend on which area of the brain has been affected and how big the stroke is. Common symptoms include weakness, numbness or paralysis of the face, arm or leg on either or both sides of the body, difficulty speaking or understanding, dizziness, loss of balance or an unexplained fall, loss of vision, or blurred or decreased vision, severe and abrupt headache, and difficulty swallowing. A stroke is a medical emergency. If you think you or someone else is having a stroke, call triple zero (000) immediately and ask for an ambulance.

### What are the risk factors for cardiovascular disease?

#### *High blood pressure (hypertension)*

Blood pressure fluctuates, but consistently high blood pressure can damage artery walls, the heart, other organs and increases the risk of heart attack and stroke. Have your blood pressure checked regularly by your doctor and discuss your individual blood pressure target with them. This is especially important if you have diabetes or high cholesterol.

#### *High total blood cholesterol*

Cholesterol is a fatty substance produced naturally by the body and is found in some foods. The body uses cholesterol for many different things, e.g. to produce some hormones and help the body use vitamin D. Too much cholesterol in the blood can add to fatty build up in the arteries and cardiovascular disease. All people – even those with healthy diets, low body weight and high physical activity levels – need to have their levels checked regularly by their doctor, as your family history can influence your cholesterol levels.

### *Smoking*

Smoking significantly increases the risk of cardiovascular disease. Even a few cigarettes per day damage the blood vessels and reduce the amount of oxygen in the blood. Smoking makes the blood and artery walls 'stickier', increasing the chance of clots forming and increasing the risk of stroke and heart attack. Risk starts to decrease from the time you stop smoking. Women who smoke while taking the contraceptive pill, greatly increase their risk of heart, stroke and blood vessel disease.

### *Diabetes*

Pre-diabetes and diabetes are major risk factors for angina, heart attack and stroke. Discuss your risk of diabetes with your doctor and be tested if needed (see 'Pre-diabetes' and 'Living with Type 2 Diabetes' fact sheets for more information). It's important to take diabetes medicine as prescribed by your doctor.

### **Other factors that can influence cardiovascular disease**

- family history of early death from CVD
- ethnic background such as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent
- lack of physical activity
- increasing age
- excess body weight, especially excess weight around the stomach
- depression and social isolation
- being post-menopausal

### **Does hormone replacement therapy (HRT) affect cardiovascular health?**

Evidence is inconclusive about whether or not HRT increases the risk of heart disease. Talk to your doctor about the benefits and risks of HRT and how it may affect you. For women with established coronary heart disease HRT should be avoided (see 'Hormone Replacement Therapy' fact sheet for more information).

### **What can I do to reduce my risk?**

- avoid smoking and passive smoking
- enjoy a wide variety of healthy foods, including whole grains, legumes and nuts
- limit saturated and trans fats
- choose reduced, low or no fat dairy products
- eat oily fish (high in omega-3 fatty acids) at least twice a week
- aim to do 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity daily
- achieve and maintain a healthy body weight
- reduce your salt intake
- have your blood cholesterol, blood pressure and blood glucose levels checked regularly by your doctor – know your numbers
- develop a health plan for prevention with your health professional
- look after your mental health and act on early signs of poor coping and functioning
- continually actively engage in relationships
- take your medicines as prescribed by your doctor

### **Understanding your risk:**

Most Australian women underestimate their risk of cardiovascular disease. For example, even though many women are aware of the warning signs of heart attack, they are more likely to call triple zero (000) for their male partner than themselves. It's important to note that 70–80 per cent of heart disease is caused by preventable lifestyle factors. So be aware of your risk, have a check up with your health practitioner, know your numbers and help prevent cardiovascular disease.

### **Where can I get more information?**

[www.jeanhailes.org.au](http://www.jeanhailes.org.au)

[www.healthforwomen.org.au](http://www.healthforwomen.org.au)

[www.heartfoundation.com.au](http://www.heartfoundation.com.au) – Heart Foundation 1300 36 27 87

[www.quit.org.au](http://www.quit.org.au) – Quit Victoria 13 7848

[www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au) – for information on medicines

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This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your health practitioner

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