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HEARTFUL REMINDERS FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH MONTH



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By Sheryl Jarvis, RN, Visiting Nurse Service of New York, May 12, 2020

While the coronavirus crisis is top of mind for everyone these days, it is important that all of us stay mindful of lifestyle choices that support good health—despite the stresses of sheltering in place and working remotely, with everyone in the family under one roof.

I'm taking the opportunity during [Women's Health Week](#), to remind the family caregivers and female patients that I care for every day as a public health nurse with the [Visiting Nurse Service of New York](#) that staying safe, means paying extra attention to heart health for women.

Heart disease is the number one killer in women – with a disproportionate effect on African American women – and yet only 47 percent of women are aware of this. The [Women's Heart Foundation](#) and [American Heart Association](#) remind us that:

* Women with diabetes are twice as at risk of heart attack as non-diabetic women. 49 percent of African American women age 20 and older have heart disease.

*Only 1 out of 5 African American women believes she is personally at risk.

*Cardiovascular diseases kill nearly 500,000 African-American women annually.

*Every year, heart attacks kill six times as many women as breast cancer.

It's no secret that for women age 65 and up, these risk factors abound. As you age, so do your blood vessels, which become less flexible and more difficult for blood to readily, move through them every day.

As a Registered Nurse with VNSNY, I work with elderly patients - many of whom are frail and homebound - who are diagnosed with heart disease. While some risk factors, such as family history, menopause, and age are inescapable, others can be avoided with a few lifestyle changes. Here are some reminders for women of all ages to reinforce healthful, heartfelt well-being:

Just Say No to Smoking: The COVID-19 pandemic has brought attention to just how vulnerable our lungs can be to toxic viruses. Smoking is toxic too. It's time to stop smoking.

Smoking increases the risk of developing cardiovascular diseases, including stroke – and heart disease. Even second-hand smoke can increase your risk, and this risk factor is greater for women than for men. Your risk of heart attack falls to about half that of a smoker in just one year after quitting.

Journal Every Kernel: Lots of people are stress eating these days, but watching what you eat – specifically, keeping high fats, sugar, and salt-laden treats at bay – can help prevent weight gain and keep cholesterol levels under control. Be sure to read food labels to check the amount of sodium in packaged foods. Keeping a food journal is a simple way to hold yourself accountable to your healthy eating goals. For example, writing down the content on your food labels – e.g. salt content levels – or how many servings of fruits and vegetables you have each day helps you to manage and plan your diet more effectively. This practice is especially important for African American women, [who may be more sensitive to the effects of salt](#).

Stairway to Heart Health: For optimum heart health, the American Heart Association recommends thirty minutes of moderate to dynamic aerobic exercise on most days of the week in order to improve heart and lung fitness and to lower risk factors for heart disease. Aerobic exercise opportunities are limitless: Go for a walk after you eat, skip the elevator and take the stairs to pick up the mail – your heart will thank you for it later! For my patients with limited mobility, I suggest doing leg exercises in your chair while watching TV, seated arm stretches or riding a stationary bike with a doctor's approval.

Sheryl Jarvis, RN, is a public health nurse with the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, the largest not-for-profit home- and community-based health care agency in the country. To learn more, visit: VNSNY.org or call 1-800-675-0391.