

Heart Smarts

Do we make the grade when it comes to heading off cardiovascular disease, the No. 1 killer in the United States? Here's a report card no one can afford to ignore.

BY MELINDA WENNER MOYER | PHOTOS MARTY BALDWIN



It's a conundrum that has frustrated health experts for years: 9 times out of 10, heart disease is preventable, yet it's still the No. 1 cause of death for men and women in the United States. Why aren't we seizing the opportunity to save ourselves? As it turns out, many of us are trying—but doing better on some fronts than others. On one hand, Americans are increasingly savvy when it comes to smoking, diet, and exercise. But according to an eye-opening survey of 2,300 women recently commissioned by the American Heart Association (AHA), we

also put too much faith in unproven remedies and underestimate our true risks. Here's a closer look at how we're faring in the fight against heart disease—and a crash course in how we can win.

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WE'RE STAMPING OUT CIGARETTES

Between 2005 and 2010, 1 out of 15 American smokers kicked the habit, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Now nearly half as many of us are lighting up as in the 1970s, and the ranks of former smokers greatly outnumber active smokers.

A sugary diet can negatively affect your cholesterol levels, even if you don't gain weight.

In other words, most smokers *do* eventually quit—and they improve their heart health almost immediately. Blood pressure and heart attack risk drop within 24 hours, and exercise becomes easier within weeks. Five years down the road, ex-smokers are half as likely to have a heart attack as when they were lighting up. So if you're still reaching for cigarettes, make this the year *you* quit. Your doctor can help you develop a smoking cessation program tailored to your needs. For example, some smokers succeed with counseling, while others have better luck with prescription medication that eases nicotine withdrawal. Go to smokefree.gov for more information.

D WE'RE TOO SWEET ON SUGAR

The average American consumes 88 grams of sugar a day in everything from soft drinks to cereal—far more than the 24-gram limit recommended for women by the AHA. Weight gain isn't the only heart hazard that can result. A sugary diet can disrupt cholesterol levels even when we don't put on pounds. A 2010 study conducted by researchers at Emory University and the CDC found that people who got more than

25 percent of their calories from added sugar—including cane sugar, high-fructose corn syrup, and honey—were 3.1 times more likely to have low levels of HDL cholesterol (the good kind) than people whose diets included less than 5 percent added sugar. And in a study last year, adults who sipped beverages sweetened with high-fructose corn syrup at every meal developed higher blood levels of harmful LDL cholesterol than those who skipped the sweet drinks, even though none of the volunteers gained weight.

If you have a sweet tooth, reading nutrition labels can help you decide when to indulge and when to pass, says Gina Price Lundberg, M.D., medical director of the Heart Center for Women in Atlanta. For example, you might decide it's not worth it to eat a granola bar with 13 grams of sugar—and opt for fresh fruit with plain yogurt instead. And just a note about fruit: Lundberg says whole foods with naturally occurring sugars are fine to eat (and don't count toward your daily limit) because they're balanced with fiber and other beneficial nutrients. For more heart-smart foods, turn to page 160.

C+ WE'RE EXERCISING A BIT MORE

In an annual survey conducted by the CDC last year, nearly 46 percent of adults reported exercising moderately for at least 150 minutes a week (or intensely for 75 minutes a week)—the minimum most health experts recommend to keep the heart healthy and strong. That's a solid improvement over 1998, when just 40 percent of people met the criteria.

BY HEATHER BOERNER

Beat on-the-job stress

Protecting your heart is hard work—especially when *work* is part of the challenge. Last year, a study conducted at Harvard Medical School found that women who routinely experience job-related stress are 40 percent more likely than women in mellow careers to suffer heart attacks, strokes, and other cardiovascular problems. But you don't have to be a professional beach bum to be healthy. BHG asked women in high-stress careers to share how they outsmart the strain—and how you can, too.

Her stress stopper: crafting “My job is very disciplined, with strict protocols to ensure the safety of passengers and crew,” Andrea says. “After a long flight, I let off tension by tapping into my creative side. Whether I’m designing pillows or putting together a scrapbook, crafting gets me into a happy flow.”

Why it works “Crafting is an immersive activity that can reduce stress by focusing the mind in the present moment,” says JoAnne Foody, M.D., medical director of the Cardiovascular Wellness Program at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston. In fact, studies show that repetitive motor tasks such as sewing can bring on an almost meditative state. *continued >*



Andrea Ratfield, 34
Minneapolis
Commercial pilot

Still, more than half of us are less active than we should be, including 25 percent who *never* break a sweat. If you're in that camp, take heart: It's never too late to get moving, and almost any activity that quickens the pulse can help, says Ruth Anderson, M.D., a pain and fitness specialist who practices in La Quinta, California. Examples of moderate aerobic exercise include brisk walking, dancing, playing tennis, even ascending a few flights of stairs. On busy days, try exercising in short bursts. "The cardiac benefits are the same whether you do 30 minutes of continuous movement or three 10-minute segments per day," Anderson says. Go to BHG.com/move for more pointers on starting a fitness plan.

D WE RELY ON PILLS FOR PREVENTION

According to the AHA survey, 70 percent of women believe that taking antioxidant supplements such as beta-carotene and vitamin E reduces the risk of heart attack. That's probably because a handful of preliminary studies once suggested that megadoses of nutrients had a protective effect. But more rigorous follow-up research has discredited those findings. "We're discovering there's really no substitute for a healthy diet," says lead survey investigator Lori Mosca, M.D., director of preventive cardiology at New York-Presbyterian Hospital and author of *Heart to Heart: A Personal Plan for Creating a Heart-Healthy Family*. For this reason, the AHA does not recommend that healthy women take any vitamin or mineral supplements for cardiovascular protection. (Women who already have heart disease or high blood levels of triglycerides might benefit from omega-3 fatty acid supplements.)

On a related note, many people take aspirin every day in the hopes that it will stave off heart attack and stroke by thinning blood. But research has found that in healthy women under 65, aspirin doesn't do much good—and can cause serious side effects such as stomach bleeding. Get your doctor's OK before starting or continuing a daily aspirin regimen.



Spence Becker, 37
Portland, Oregon
Neonatal/pediatric
respiratory therapist

Her stress stopper: exercise

"I deal with life-or-death situations every day; by the end of a long shift, I'm filled with anxious energy," Spence says. "Several years ago I tried weight lifting and discovered that regular workouts really take the edge off. Afterward, I feel amazingly relaxed."

Why it works A workout promotes the release of mood-boosting endorphins and hormones, Foody says. That's on top of the fact that exercise strengthens the heart muscle itself. Just 15 minutes a day of moderate-intensity aerobic movement can make a positive difference on both fronts.

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Her stress stopper: funny flicks “After I get home from the courthouse, where I’ve presided over some of the most horrific cases my county has ever seen, nothing beats sitting around with my sons and watching a movie filled with silly humor,” Mary Ann says. “Will Ferrell is a favorite in our house.”

Why it works “Enjoying a funny film is a great stress reliever for people with mentally intense jobs, particularly when they watch with family,” Foody says. “Not only does laughing instantly put you in a better mood, it lowers your blood pressure, promotes muscle relaxation, and stimulates circulation.”



Mary Ann O'Malley, 51
Lafayette, California
Superior Court Judge



Heather Arthur, 30
Los Angeles
Stuntwoman

Her stress stopper: wine and chocolate “Even during a routine stunt, there’s always a chance that I could be severely injured—or worse,” Heather says. “When I’ve had a demanding day on set, I need a little me-time treat. Nibbling a bit of dark chocolate and sipping a glass of red wine helps the tension melt away.”

Why it works A nightly relaxation ritual can serve as a calming break between work and home life. And you could do worse than enjoying wine and chocolate. “Red wine—as long you keep it to one small glass a day—helps relax arteries and raise levels of good cholesterol,” Foody says. “And dark chocolate delivers antioxidants that improve blood vessel function.” For the biggest antioxidant boost, choose chocolate that contains 60 percent or more cacao. *continued >*

B WE GET SCREENED, BUT SOMETIMES TOO MUCH

An estimated 84 percent of women had their blood pressure checked last year, while 66 percent got a cholesterol test. It’s smart to stay on top of those numbers—they’re some of the strongest predictors of heart disease risk. For example, a person with hypertension is almost twice as likely to have a heart attack as someone with normal blood pressure, while a high ratio of bad to good cholesterol can more than triple a person’s risk.

But more tests are not always better. A 2011 *Consumer Reports* survey of more than 8,000 people ages 40–60 found that almost two-thirds had undergone a stress test or an electrocardiogram (EKG) in the past year, even though many of the respondents were free of heart symptoms and at low risk for problems. These specialized tests can produce false-positive results that lead to unnecessary follow-up procedures, such as CT angiograms. If your doctor orders a stress test or an EKG, make sure it’s to investigate symptoms and not just for routine screening.

F WE’RE NOT WISE TO WARNING SIGNS

Despite the fact that more women than men die of heart disease every year, we’re less likely to seek treatment for symptoms. That’s partly because

women often experience what are known as atypical signs of heart disease, Lundberg says. Instead of classic chest pains, women might develop shortness of breath, palpitations, dizziness, and fatigue—symptoms that might not seem urgent enough to warrant a trip to the doctor. What’s more, only 53 percent of women in the AHA survey said they would dial 911 if they experienced signs of a heart attack, including unexplained nausea, sweating, weakness, shortness of breath, and pressure in the chest or shoulders. “Many women worry that their symptoms aren’t ‘real,’ or they attribute them to something else,” says Judith Lichtman, Ph.D., an epidemiologist at Yale University. Early treatment is crucial—the risk of death from a heart attack increases for every 30 minutes a patient goes untreated. If you suspect you’re having a heart attack, don’t second-guess yourself; seek emergency care immediately.

C WE’RE STARTING TO SLIM DOWN

Last fall, a Gallup poll of more than 90,000 households found that the number of obese people—based on self-reported figures for height and weight—declined slightly to 25.8 percent. And for the first time since Gallup began tracking weight trends closely, more Americans are at a healthy weight (36.6 percent) than are moderately overweight (35.8 percent).

Her stress stopper: meditation “There’s no escaping the stress of working in a war zone, but meditating keeps it from getting to me,” says Pratt, now stationed in Afghanistan. “I set a timer for five minutes, sit quietly, and direct all my attention to my breathing. This clears my mind, which would otherwise race at a million miles an hour.”

Why it works “A few minutes of meditation can trigger a relaxation response that slows the heart rate and brings down blood pressure,” Foody says. One daily exercise to try: Find a quiet place to sit, relax the muscles in your body, close your eyes, and take deep cleansing breaths while focusing on a calming word or image.



Helen Pratt, 48
Orlando
U.S. Marine Corps colonel



Don't stress!

We have more great tips online. Go to BHG.com/calm for 12 heart-smart tension tamers that don't cost a penny.

In terms of heart health, the best way to monitor your weight is to measure your waist, Mosca says. “Fat found around the middle is particularly problematic—it’s associated with inflammation, insulin resistance, higher blood pressure, and lower levels of good HDL cholesterol,” she explains. Using a nonelastic measuring tape, measure your waist circumference once a month, with a goal of keeping it under 35 inches. And don’t beat yourself up if your number exceeds that. Simply increase your aerobic exercise and boost your intake of fruits, veggies, whole grains, and low-fat dairy. (You can skip the endless sit-ups, which work the abdominal muscles but don’t burn overlying fat.)

A WE’RE MAKING MORE MEALS AT HOME

In a recent survey of households conducted by the Research Institute for Cooking & Kitchen Intelligence, a trade group for kitchen-supply manufacturers and retailers, 59 percent of respondents said they regularly prepare meals at home, up from 43 percent in 2008. And though the nation’s economic slump might be the driving force, there’s a silver lining for heart health: “Compared with restaurant meals, the meals we make in our kitchens tend to be lower in calories, fat, and salt,” says Guadalupe Ayala, Ph.D., co-director of the San Diego Prevention Research Center. For example, one study found that food prepared outside the home derives about 38 percent of its calories from fat, whereas fat accounts for just 32 percent of the calories in home-cooked food. Over the course of many meals, these differences really add up. Need some culinary inspiration? Go to BHG.com/heartsmart for our 20 best heart-healthy recipes, as chosen by readers. ■