

Women and Heart Disease

Research now proves that cardiovascular disease is the number one killer of women over the age of 25 both in the United States and in Florida.

Cardiovascular diseases including heart attack and stroke kill more than 500,000 women each year. This is more than the other top 10 leading causes of death put together. One in ten American women 45 to 64 years of age has some form of heart disease, and this increases to one in four women over 65. Stroke is the third leading cause of death for American women, and the leading cause of serious, long-term disability.

IN THE PAST, HEART DISEASE HAS BEEN PREDOMINANTLY LABELED A MAN'S DISEASE. For many years health care professionals believed that estrogen provided complete protection against heart disease. While estrogen does provide a measure of protection, it is not always sufficient. As women age their estrogen levels drop and the risk of heart disease increases. The estrogen protective factor is also diminished if there are additional risk factors.

Diabetes is a major risk factor for heart disease. The Framingham Study found that diabetes tripled the age-adjusted risk for cardiovascular disease in women. The beneficial effect of hormone replacement therapy is also decreased in women with diabetes.

Alarming, a recent survey of women conducted by the American Heart Association reported that only eight percent of American women considered heart disease and stroke as their greatest health threats. Many women, especially younger women, still believe that cancer is their number one health threat. However, statistics show that one woman in eight will develop breast cancer over the course of her lifetime, but only one in 28 will die of it. Currently in the United States one of every two women dies of heart disease or stroke.

The Journal of American Medicine, Women's Health Information Center also conducted an awareness study. Results revealed that less than 33 percent of women identified heart disease as a leading cause of death; women aged 25 to 44 indicated they were not well informed about heart disease and stroke; and 70 percent reported they had not discussed heart disease with their physician.

Statistics show that minority women are at an even greater risk of heart disease and stroke. In women ages 35 to 74, universally, the age-adjusted death rate for coronary heart disease is 71 percent higher for black women than for white women. The United States 1995 death rates for cardiovascular diseases were 67 percent higher for black women than for white women.

