



Menopause & Heart Disease: Managing Your Risk After “The Change of Life”

During a woman’s reproductive life cycle, a naturally occurring hormone called **estrogen** provides some protection against cardiovascular disease, so women’s risk of heart disease is lower compared to men their age. While women – just like men – can develop heart disease, the risk is greater for women after **menopause**. This is when the ovaries stop producing estrogen and progesterone, causing menstrual periods to cease. If you have reached menopause, your overall risk of heart disease may increase due to the reduction of these hormones in your body. To learn more about why the risk for heart disease is greater after menopause and steps you can take to help prevent heart disease, **keep reading!**

Why Does Heart Disease Risk Increase After Menopause?

While heart disease risk increases for both men and women as they age, a woman’s symptoms may become more noticeable after the onset of menopause. Menopause does not cause cardiovascular disease in women, but the risk factors may increase during this time in a woman’s life. Unhealthy lifestyle habits may take a greater toll on heart health as women age, and especially after menopause.

Why is it important to understand the correlation between menopause and heart disease risk? **Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death in women worldwide**, and it accounts for 30 percent of deaths worldwide. So, as the female population ages, more women across the globe will develop by heart disease. By 2025, there will be 1.1 billion postmenopausal women worldwide.

According to the American Heart Association, an overall increase in heart attacks among women is seen about 10 years after menopause. The average age for menopause is between 51 and 54 years old.

In fact, studies have shown that women who experience menopause before the age of 40 (“early menopause”), either naturally or due to a hysterectomy, are twice as likely to develop heart disease than women of the same age who have not yet gone through menopause.

How does estrogen protect a woman’s heart? By helping the arteries to be more flexible and strengthening their interior



walls. This allows the arteries to relax and expand to accommodate blood flow.

In addition to a drop in estrogen, **a woman’s body goes through other changes when in menopause that may increase her risk for heart disease.**

- **Blood pressure** levels may begin to rise, which puts an increased strain on your heart and increases your risk for other medical conditions. (Ideal: Below 120/80 mmHg)
- **Bad “low-density lipoprotein” (LDL) cholesterol** levels may increase. Too much of the “bad cholesterol” leads to a buildup in your arteries. (Ideal: Below 100 mg/dL)
- **Good “high-density lipoprotein” (HDL) cholesterol** levels may decrease. The “good cholesterol” helps prevent build-up in your arteries. (Ideal: 60 mg/dL or greater)
- **Triglyceride** levels may increase. This is a type of fat that circulates in your blood but is stored as body fat. (Ideal: Below 150 mg/dL)
- **Waist circumference** may increase, which puts you at greater risk for obesity. (Ideal: Below 35 inches)
- **Body fat**, which can increase your risk for high blood sugar and diabetes. (Ideal levels are based on your height/weight ratio.)



How to Lower Heart Disease Risk Before, During & After Menopause

Many women today are living longer and have greater expectations for an active, healthy life into their senior years. While menopause is a natural aging process that all women experience, it's a good idea to take a regular inventory of your health to see where improvements to health habits can be made. **You don't have to wait until menopause begins!** These are good strategies for women's heart health at all stages of life.

Get Screened

Regular heart screenings are important to understand your risk for heart disease and for maintaining good heart health. The American Heart Association recommends checking your cholesterol every five years, blood glucose levels every three years, blood pressure during regular healthcare visits, waist circumference checked as needed, and body mass index checked during every regular healthcare visit.

Exercise Regularly

Women should aim for at least 150 minutes of physical activity per week to help lower their risk of heart disease. Walking, cycling, dancing and swimming are examples of good, low-impact aerobic exercises.

Eat a Healthy Diet

A heart-healthy diet can improve your heart function, energy levels and overall well-being. Make dietary choices that include fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains and low-fat protein. Choose foods that are low in sodium (salt), cholesterol, sugar and unhealthy fats.

Reduce Stress

Sometimes, after menopause, women can suffer from increased stress levels. Stress may affect behaviors and factors that increase heart disease risk: high blood pressure and cholesterol levels, smoking, physical inactivity and overeating. But instead of getting depressed, try to embrace this time in your life by eating right, exercising and socializing with friends.

Quit Smoking

If you smoke, there is no better time to quit than today. Smoking may contribute to early menopause, increase the risk of blood clots, decrease the flexibility of arteries and lower good cholesterol levels.

Maintaining good heart health is of utmost importance to women who have gone through menopause, mainly because their heart disease risk is higher than it was while in their pre-menopausal years.

What About Hormone Replacement Therapy?

Despite the benefits of estrogen, most medical providers recommend against postmenopausal hormone therapy to reduce the risk of heart disease or stroke. Several studies have shown it appears to not reduce the risk.

Questions to Ask Your Health Care Provider About Menopause and Heart Health

- Do you consider yourself up-to-date on **treatment options for menopausal health**, including hormone therapy and other medical therapies?
- Can you discuss the most recent **research about hormone therapy** and its safety? How do the benefits and risks apply to my personal health needs?
- Should I undergo a **screening** to determine my risk for heart disease? How often should I be screened now that I have experienced menopause?
- What **lifestyle changes** would be helpful for me to reduce my future risk of heart disease?
- Can you identify any **alternative therapies** that might be helpful?

What Should I Do If I Have Other Questions?

Ask them. When women and their doctors are alert to how menopause impacts their risk of heart disease, it can be addressed earlier in the disease process. It's important for women to share their health information and medical files with their gynecologist (OB/GYN), primary care providers and (if applicable) cardiologists, in order to ensure their care is coordinated.

Ask your physician, **"Have we checked my heart health recently?"** Identifying and treating cardiovascular disease sooner rather than later will increase the odds of being able to work with your physician to slow or reverse the disease process.

SecondsCount is pleased to also provide this information as a downloadable PDF. We invite you to print it and share it with others, including your healthcare providers.