

The Key to a Healthy Heart

Most women I meet, if asked about their greatest health concern, would probably name breast cancer as the malady they most fear. But though breast cancer might generate a more passionate reaction than heart disease, the truth of the matter is this: More women in the United States die each year from heart disease than from all cancers combined.

One out of five women in this country has some form of cardiovascular disease. It is the leading cause of death in American women, claiming more than half a million lives annually.

And it's no longer considered an older woman's disease. Even though women typically don't show signs of heart disease until their 60s (roughly 10 years later than men), about 9,000 women each year under age 45 experience a heart attack.

In addition to the age at onset, there are other things that distinguish heart disease in women from heart disease in men. Women tend to do worse after their first heart attack. Forty-two percent of women who have a heart attack will die within the first year as compared to 24 percent of men.

Heart disease often goes unrecognized in women. The symptoms may be unusual, ignored or attributed to something less serious, such as indigestion. And many women don't experience any symptoms at all prior to having their first heart attack.

I'm not telling you all this because I want to leave you worried and apprehensive; but I do want to stir up in you a desire to modify your lifestyle so that your risk of developing heart disease is lowered.

Our lifestyles play a major role in our health and longevity. In America, 300,000 deaths each year are related to improper diet and inadequate exercise. If you add the deaths

attributable to smoking, alcohol, illicit drugs and sexual indiscretion, the number becomes astonishing.

Lifestyle is such a major factor in heart disease that an estimated 80 percent of cases are linked directly to unhealthy eating and lifestyle habits. Solomon said, "Where there is no guidance, the people fall" (Prov. 11:14, NASB).

But when it comes to health, too many of us are falling, even in the face of reliable and readily available guidance. Information on health abounds and is more accessible now than at any other time in our history.

Medical research has increased the level of understanding for not only physicians and other health care providers but also the general public. Television, newspapers, magazines and the Internet provide a never-ending flow of data on health-related topics. The information is there; we're just not implementing it.

Of course, not everyone who suffers from a heart attack or finds himself in need of bypass surgery can shoulder the entire blame for his situation. Certainly there are people who have a predisposition to heart disease that is totally beyond their control.

But in spite of the fact that some of us are in a position to change our risk for disease through modifying our behavior, too many (born-again believers included) are simply not taking any tangible steps toward change.

Making Healthy Choices

So what are some ways to lower your risk? The majority of risk factors for heart disease can be positively modified through lifestyle changes. Only one risk factor—having a genetic predisposition—is completely beyond our control.

Other risk factors include tobacco use, high blood pressure,

high cholesterol, diabetes, obesity and a sedentary lifestyle, all of which are influenced by the way we live.

Besides cigarette smoking and a family history of heart disease, all the risk factors listed above are impacted by our eating and exercise habits. As I mentioned before, poor diet and a lack of exercise are the cause of 300,000 deaths each year. Even if a risk factor cannot be entirely eliminated by practicing healthier habits (there are plenty of people, for instance, who diligently follow a low-salt diet but still have high blood pressure), lifestyle modification is still recommended and is highly beneficial.

Lifestyle modification may also impact a risk factor I haven't yet mentioned—an unhealthy emotional state. The scientific community continues to confirm what the Bible has taught us all along: There's a compelling link between negative emotions such as anger, anxiety and hostility and an increased risk for heart disease.

The connection between heart failure and anger is especially strong. Anger and hostility evoke physiological responses in our bodies that are potentially life-threatening.

All of us at times respond in anger to such things as criticism or frustration. But many women have a tendency to respond angrily with little or no provocation. Those who have this personality type not only are at increased risk for heart disease but also are prone to develop it at an early age.

One study conducted on people receiving heart scans showed an association between angry facial expressions and abnormalities in heart function. Another study showed the converse—that humor served to protect the heart. No wonder the Bible tells us that “a happy heart makes the face cheerful” and “a cheerful look brings joy to the heart” (Prov. 15:13,30, NIV)!

As Spirit-filled believers, we have the power to lower our

risk for heart disease. So why aren't we using it?

I've spent many years in clinical practice and in seeking insight from the Lord on matters pertaining to health. Needless to say, I've treated numerous Christian women who have been successful in taking charge of their lifestyles to improve their health.

But I've also had my share of patients who failed. From them I've learned that although there are many reasons a person may fail in this attempt, two stand out. One is that we tend to rely on our own abilities, underestimating the difficulty involved in changing our lifestyles. Another is that all too often (deep down in our "never admit" zone) we're getting a lot of satisfaction from indulging our flesh.

Anyone who has ever tried to break an old habit or develop a new one knows the task can be challenging. And implementing a "heart-healthy" lifestyle is no exception. You must change several things—what you eat, how much you eat, how often you eat, the way you prepare your food and your level of physical activity.

But even before you attempt to make changes, you must acknowledge the difficulty of the task. Sometimes when I counsel Christian women on how tough it is to change old habits, they grandly proclaim the first part of Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ" (NKJV). Sadly, they don't recognize that it's the second part of this verse—"who strengthens me"—that is so vital to our success.

Yes, we can do all things through Christ, but we must never forget it is the Lord who gives us strength. The likelihood for long-term success through sheer determination alone is not very high, but when we humble ourselves and receive power through the Holy Spirit, we can walk in victory.

The Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit has given us "everything we need for life and godliness" (2 Pet. 1:3, NIV).

He has equipped us to live soberly and to practice self-discipline with moderation in every aspect of our lives.

I don't think Jesus gave us the "authority to trample on snakes and scorpions" (Luke 10:19) only to render us powerless in resisting a second serving of cheesecake. If, however, we want access to this level of authority, we must first recognize the source. Then we, like the apostle Paul, can experience God's power "made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9) and receive the strength we need to change our lifestyles and improve our health.

Too Good to Resist

The second reason for failure is that we aren't serious enough about subjecting our flesh. In my years of practice, I've had female patients with high cholesterol tell me they refuse to cut back on hamburgers, pork chops and steaks. I've seen women with diabetes who would rather increase their dosage of insulin than walk for half an hour each day. And I've watched women with high blood pressure pour on the salt for no other reason than to satisfy a craving for salty foods.

Throughout Scripture we're admonished to keep our flesh under subjection. But the reality is this: We have become so cozy with the self-indulgent tendencies of the world that we hardly notice when they rub off on us. For many Christians, the attributes of self-control, sobriety, discipline and moderation have yielded to a mind-set that says, "If it feels good (or, for that matter, if it tastes good)—do it!"

Often when we speak of issues such as self-indulgence and yielding to the flesh, the first thing that comes to mind is sexual sin. But there's more to lust than fornication. Giving in to the cravings of the flesh in any way, including indulging ourselves with food, is a dangerous venture.

The Bible links this form of sin to self-indulgence and gluttony, as this vivid description of Israel's rebellion

shows: "Jeshurun [Israel] grew fat and kicked; filled with food, he became heavy and sleek. He abandoned the God who made him and rejected the Rock his Savior" (Deut. 32:15).

A heart-healthy diet is different from the typical American diet. It is high in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans and legumes. It requires that we cut back on foods high in saturated fat and trans-fatty acids, and instead eat more foods containing monounsaturated fats and omega-3 fatty acids.

Living in a heart-healthy way also requires us to exercise regularly and strive to maintain a healthy weight. These dramatic changes cannot be realized if we are unwilling to deny the flesh.

Finally, to have a healthy heart, it is crucial that we purge ourselves of any unhealthy emotions. We must take Paul's advice to "get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice" (Eph. 4:31).

His words aren't simply a formula for maintaining peaceful fellowship. They are a recipe that could save our lives.

So don't hang on to deadly emotions. Let go of bitterness, be slow to anger and be quick to forgive. Your obedience will not only be pleasing to the Lord; it will also protect your heart.

As Christian women, we must remember that God calls us to subject our flesh for our protection, not as a punishment. His grace gives us everything we need to say no to our cravings, our laziness and our negative emotions (Tit. 2:11-12). Unfortunately, not many women are compelled to do this until after their first heart attack. My prayer is that you avoid such a tragedy.

The Lord demonstrated His unfailing love for us in fulfilling the promise to "give [us] a new heart and put a new spirit in [us]" (Ezek. 36:26). Let's honor Him by taking care of our

whole persons—body, soul and spirit—including our hearts.

Read a companion devotional.

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