

What Women Need to Know to Protect Their Hearts ●●●

Every woman can take steps every day toward a more heart-healthy lifestyle. While you cannot change some of your risk factors like family history or age, you can take plenty of other steps to lower your risk of heart disease. Take your first step today – *by becoming more aware.*

Heart disease is the #1 leading cause of death among women in the United States. Each year, more than 300,000 or 1 in 5, die from it. Yet, research shows it is a silent killer. One study revealed that only 50% of women under 55 who had a heart attack thought that they were at risk. That is why learning your risk and taking action to reduce it is vital.

*Recently, we talked with **Kristen Knowles, CRNP** of Calvert Internal Medicine Group to learn more about heart disease in women and the changes you can make to help protect your heart. Knowles, who is a board-certified adult gerontology nurse practitioner, works directly with patients to safely prevent as well as manage cardiovascular disease.*

Q *What are the first signs of heart disease in women?*

There are first typical and atypical or subtle signs of heart disease in women. These range from fatigue or unusual tiredness, dizziness, shortness of breath and nausea to pain in the chest, neck, jaw, shoulder, upper back or arms.

Q *At what age do women start having heart problems?*

Heart disease can affect women at any age; however, it typically presents after age 55 due to a decline in estrogen. In recent years, heart disease has been on the rise in younger women with risk factors like diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

Q *What are the leading causes of heart disease in women?*

The most common causes of heart disease in women include:

- Hypertension or high blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Diabetes
- Smoking/tobacco use
- Obesity
- Stress
- Unhealthy diet
- Family history



“

As a second-time mom, I'd like to stress the importance of heart health as well as mental health in women, especially mothers. Too often, we put everyone else first and that can greatly impact our health. I encourage us to show up for ourselves the same way we do for our families and those we love.”

– Kristen A. Knowles, MSN, RN, AGPCNP-BC

Q *Why is it important to know your heart health numbers?*

Knowing your numbers helps detect problems early and prevent complications. Heart health numbers include blood pressure, cholesterol, BMI-body mass index, fasting glucose and A1C blood sugar average over a 3-month period.

Q *What are the silent signs of a heart attack in a woman?*

Silent signs of heart attack in women include:

- Extreme fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Nausea, vomiting or indigestion
- Anxiety or feeling of impending doom
- Back, neck or shoulder pain

Q *How can women lower their risk of heart disease?*

Risk of heart disease can be lowered by:

- 150 minutes/week of moderate activity
- Managing blood pressure, cholesterol, blood sugar
- Eating a heart healthy diet
- Maintaining healthy weight
- Limiting alcohol

Q *What exercises improve heart health?*

The best exercises for heart health include:

- Aerobic- brisk walking, biking, swimming, dancing, hiking
- Strength training- using bodyweight, resistance bands
- Flexibility and balance
- Interval training

Q *What are the top foods to avoid for heart health?*

Top foods to avoid for heart health are:

- Processed/fast foods
- Sugary drinks/sweets
- Fried foods
- Trans fats and hydrogenated oils
- Excessive red and processed meats
- Refined carbohydrates-white breads, pastries
- High-sodium foods – canned, packaged snacks



“Now, it’s time for me.”

At barely 5 feet tall, **Janet Mitchell**, 48, of Lusby had tipped the scales at nearly 230 pounds just two years ago. Today, after joining CalvertHealth’s weight management program, she has lost 68 pounds and is closing in on her goal.

Janet struggled for nearly three decades to shed the 80 pounds she gained during pregnancy with her two children. The extra weight had caused her issues both physically and mentally – leading to high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and exercise-induced asthma as well as depression and anxiety.

Before losing the weight Janet said, “I hurt all over all the time. I would wake up hurting and go to bed hurting. I was unhappy with myself and did not like the way I looked. It was a vicious cycle.”

In 2000, Janet learned she had Hashimoto’s disease, a common autoimmune disorder where the immune system attacks the thyroid gland, damaging it and leading to an underactive thyroid. This slows metabolism, causing symptoms like fatigue and weight gain.

It was becoming a grandmother that motivated her to change. “I love just getting down on the floor and playing with my granddaughter,” said Janet. “I wanted to be the kind of granny who can do anything and everything with her. I didn’t want to say we can’t do that because Granny’s health won’t let her.”

As part of CalvertHealth’s weight management program, Janet said she has changed her eating and exercise habits and takes a GLP-1 medication. Never a breakfast eater, she now starts her day with a nutritious shake. “When my husband and I go out to eat, we choose the healthier options and we share.”

Janet also rides her Peloton® bike for 20-30 minutes three to four times a week as soon as she comes home from work. She also does strength training twice a week using resistance bands. “I just want to tone not add bulk. After two C-sections, you get a little pooch.”

Six months ago, she had to buy all new clothes. “On my most recent vacation,” Janet said, “I didn’t have to use my inhaler even one time. Before, short walks would cause wheezing. They have even lowered my blood pressure medication. My husband said I have the twinkle back in my eyes.”

But she is not stopping. “I’m not at my goal yet. I would tell anybody who is struggling with losing weight to ‘try it.’ You just have to work the program. If you put in 100%. It will give you back 100%.”



TO LEARN MORE about CalvertHealth’s Weight Management Program, visit CalvertHealthMedicine.org/Transform