

It's time to take better care of your heart

By Sam Edsill, The Gazette

With Valentine's Day right around the corner, your heart might be on your mind.

And since February is American Heart Month, it's probably a good time to start taking better care of your heart.

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States for both men and women. Every year more than 600,000 Americans die from heart disease, which includes several types of heart conditions such as coronary artery disease, where blood flow to the heart becomes restricted. These conditions can lead to a stroke or heart attack.

Heart disease was long thought to affect men more than women, but over the last two decades that perception has changed. In 2004 the American Heart Association started a campaign called Go Red for Women to raise awareness that heart disease and stroke are the leading cause of death among women.

"Men and women are at equal risk for dying of heart disease," said Dr. Keith Kopec, a cardiologist at UnityPoint Health - St. Luke's Heart Care Clinic. However, Kopec said, there are differences in how and when heart disease manifests in men and women.



Dr. Keith Kopec
UnityPoint Health

"Heart disease tends to show up in men at an earlier age than in women," said Kopec. "We're more likely to see a man in his 40s with heart disease than a woman in her 40s with heart disease." That's in part because the hormone estrogen



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provides some protection, but once women reach menopause that protection declines, Kopec said.

The symptoms that are traditionally associated with a heart attack—heaviness or weight in the center of the chest and pain on the left side of the body—are more common in men, said Dr. Ryan Hollenbeck, an interventional cardiologist at the Mercy Heart Center in Cedar Rapids.

Women are more likely to experience dizziness, nausea, fatigue or stomach pain—symptoms that may not be quickly recognized as precursors to a heart attack, according to the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute.

As we age, our risk of heart attacks increases, Hollenbeck said. "In general, we start to see more heart attacks starting around age 60," he said. But

don't wait until then to start taking care of yourself: "By the time you get to that point, you've missed opportunities in life that could have made a difference," said Hollenbeck.

RISK FACTORS

Some of the biggest risk factors for heart disease include smoking, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and carrying excess weight around the midsection.

"One thing I see a lot in men is metabolic syndrome," Hollenbeck said, which is a cluster of conditions including high blood pressure, lipid disorders and abdominal obesity. "Belly fat slows down testosterone production, which can reduce muscle mass. The more tired you are and the less muscle you have, it starts a downward cycle that's hard to break out of. The best way to do that is with a healthy diet and weight loss."

High blood pressure, or hypertension, is dangerous because it puts stress on your brain, kidney, heart and blood vessels. This can eventually cause your blood vessels to become stiff.

"A single high blood pressure isn't harmful," Hollenbeck said. "What we worry about are people who have high blood pressure regularly throughout the day over a long period of time." Having annual checkups with your primary care provider can help you track your blood pressure in order to catch problems before they get worse.



Dr. Ryan Hollenbeck
Mercy Heart Center

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“One of the most important strategies for preventing heart disease is having regular visits with your primary care doctor from a young age,” Hollenbeck said. “I talk to people a lot about making small changes over time,” such as improving diet and being more physically active. “Primary care doctors are good for that because ideally you’re seeing the same person over many years, and that can lead to better outcomes down the road.”

Smoking is another big risk factor for heart disease. “Quitting smoking will help more than any pill I give you,” Kopec said.

PREVENTION

One of the best ways to prevent heart disease is by staying physically active to strengthen your cardiovascular system and avoid gaining excess weight. The American Heart Association recommends 20 minutes of moderate exercise each day.

People who are overweight have a much higher risk of heart disease, Kopec said. Gaining an extra pound or two each year will add up over time. “Weight control can help with blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes, let alone the effect on your joints. Those who aren’t overweight do better.”

In addition to exercise, make sure you’re eating right, Hollenbeck said. “Diet is a really important part of prevention and maintaining long-term health,” he said. “It’s a lot of common sense.” Choose healthy proteins like chicken and seafood, fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, nuts and legumes.

And make sure you’re watching your sodium: high levels of sodium in your diet can lead to high blood pressure. Shoot for around 2,000 mg or less per day, Hollenbeck said. One good way to control your sodium intake is by cooking most of your own meals.

The sooner you make any of these changes the better, Kopec said. Don’t wait until something goes wrong to take better care of your heart.

“Prevention, prevention, prevention,” said Kopec. “You can make a difference in a lot of cases. Unfortunately many people don’t take those words of advice until something happens to them. When someone is admitted to the hospital with a heart issue, that is a teachable moment. But I wish we’d never gotten there in the first place.”