

# World Menopause Day

2023

International **IMS**  
Menopause Society



## Cardiovascular Disease:

### What Women Need to Know

Breast cancer is often believed to be the number one cause of death and disability in women. In reality, it is cardiovascular disease. The number of cases of cardiovascular disease is high... and continuing to rise.

But by understanding more about the causes and impacts of cardiovascular disease, you can take steps to reduce your risk.

**Here's what every woman needs to know...**



## What is Cardiovascular disease?

The term 'cardiovascular disease' actually covers a broad range of disorders, including **coronary artery disease**, which is a blockage or spasm of the arteries bringing blood to your heart. This prevents the heart from being properly nourished and you may experience symptoms like chest pain/heaviness, or shortness of breath. We call this angina. If left unchecked, it can cause a heart attack.



There are other types of cardiovascular disease, too. **Congestive heart failure** is increasingly common in women. This is when your heart can't pump blood efficiently enough so it starts to collect in your lungs and legs, along with other body fluids. Congestive heart failure is often caused by coronary disease, high blood pressure, or diabetes, as well as other, less common factors. If you have congestive heart failure, you may experience fatigue, shortness of breath – particularly when exercising or moving around - and swelling of the feet and legs.

**Transient ischemic attacks (TIAs)** and **strokes** are also forms of cardiovascular disease. These are sudden events that can lead to a range of symptoms including changes in vision or speech; facial, arm, or leg weakness; or feelings of confusion.

## Why is cardiovascular disease increasing in women?

More and more women – particularly younger women – have high blood pressure, obesity or diabetes. This is leading to an increase in cardiovascular disease, and we are seeing it in younger as well as older women. The trend is expected to continue. By understanding the different risk factors, you can take steps to reduce your chances of getting cardiovascular disease. And, the sooner you act, the better.



## The link between reproductive factors and cardiovascular disease:

There is another important piece of the puzzle that women need to be aware of. Researchers have recently discovered that a woman's reproductive experiences throughout her life (including menstruation, pregnancy, any breast cancer treatments, and menopause) can affect her chances of developing cardiovascular disease later in life. Awareness of this can help to determine your individual risk.

**The impact of menstruation:** If a woman begins her menstrual periods when she is very young or has a history of absent or irregular menstrual cycles (if she has polycystic ovary syndrome, for example) then this may lead to an increased risk of cardiovascular disease later in life.

**The impact of pregnancy complications:** Complications during pregnancy or soon after delivery, including high blood pressure, can increase the chances of developing heart disease.

## The impact of treatment for breast cancer:

A woman who has undergone breast cancer treatment may have sustained damage to her heart due to certain chemotherapy, radiation, and estrogen-lowering medications. This can increase the risk of developing heart failure and blockages of the coronary arteries.

## The impact of menopause:

If menopause happens at a particularly early age (i.e. below the age of 45) or at an age that is considered premature (i.e. below the age of 40), this can speed up the possible development of cardiovascular disease. However, menopause at the average age of 51 may lead to a heightened risk of developing the disease. Unless there is a good reason not to, the use of menopausal hormone therapy, particularly for women with premature and early menopause, is recommended to reduce the risks of heart disease.



## Reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease

There are positive steps that you can take to prevent most cardiovascular events—heart attacks, heart failure, and stroke. And, while it's true that there are a few exceptions, in most cases if you can identify the risk factors early on and take proactive steps, you can avoid developing cardiovascular disease.

**It's about making positive lifestyle choices to maintain good cardiovascular health. The top five most important lifestyle factors are:**

- Not smoking
- Doing regular physical activity
- Healthy eating
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Getting enough sleep.

**If you incorporate these into your day-to-day life, the potential benefits are enormous.**

One research study demonstrated you could **increase your life expectancy by as much as 14 years**. And it's not just your cardiovascular health that will improve. Blood pressure, blood sugar, and blood cholesterol will all see a positive impact – and, as each of these factors is also associated with a greater chance of developing cardiovascular problems in the future, your heart health will benefit. In some cases, you might need medication to help you achieve the desired results.

**Talk to your doctor about this.**



## A step-by-step approach to better cardiovascular health for women

The first step is to recognise that cardiovascular health is a top priority for women. Talk to your doctor and ask them to calculate your individual risk of developing cardiovascular disease. Be sure to let them know about your menstrual cycle, pregnancy, and menopause history so they can build an accurate picture.

Next, take proactive steps to lower your risk. **We recommend:**

### 1. Making Positive Lifestyle Choices

Give up cigarettes

Move your body more

Practice mindful eating

Maintain or achieve a healthy weight

Develop good sleep habits

### 2. Identify and Treat Recognised Medical Risks

Alongside your doctor, take steps to improve:

Blood pressure

Blood sugar

Blood cholesterol

### 3. Tell Your Doctor About Your Reproductive History

Letting them know about the following will help them to identify if you are at particularly high risk of cardiovascular disease:

Irregular monthly menstrual cycles

Pregnancy complication

Breast cancer treatments

Age of menopause

#### Did you know...?

According to the World Heart Federation, more than a third (35%) of deaths in women each year are due to cardiovascular disease. That's more than 13 times greater than deaths resulting from breast cancer. Taking positive steps today could lower your risk of developing cardiovascular disease and improve your life.

“Cardiovascular risk represents a lifetime of choices and experiences, but menopause offers the opportunity of a single point in time to step back, take stock, and do all you can toward promoting future cardiovascular health for the rest of your life.”

PROFESSOR CYNTHIA STUENKEL

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