



Together for YOUR Health

February is more than St. Valentine's month; it's also American Heart Month

By Mark Netherda MD, Regional Medical Director, Partnership HealthPlan of California

It's February, the month of Valentine's Day, when we all see red, white, and pink hearts everywhere. Not surprisingly, February is also designated as American Heart Month.

Heart disease is the most common cause of death for women and men in the United States. Every year, about 600,000 people die from heart disease. In 2010, 25 percent of all deaths in California were related to heart disease. That's more than all the deaths from lung disease, diabetes, liver disease, accidents, Alzheimer's disease, and suicides combined.

Heart disease can also cause significant, life-impacting changes for millions of Americans. Heart disease shows up in several ways: heart attacks (about 750,000 every year) due to a blockage in a blood vessel; irregular heartbeats due to damaged heart muscle and leaky heart valves; and unusual tiredness, shortness of breath and swelling of the feet that can be caused by poor circulation from a weakened heart. Be aware of the early warning signs of heart disease:

- Chest pain or heaviness that keeps coming back or lasts more than a few minutes.
- Pain or numbness in the neck, jaw, back, shoulders, or arms.
- Weakness, light-headedness, nausea, indigestion or cold sweats.
- Unusual shortness of breath.

Above all, if you think you or someone else is having a heart attack, **CALL 911 IMMEDIATELY.**

Until recently, more women than men were dying of heart disease. This was because people thought heart disease was a man's disease, and women's symptoms were sometimes overlooked. Fortunately, there has been increased awareness of heart disease risks in women over the past 20 years.

It is important for women to be aware of the risks and the early warning signs. Some of the less common symptoms like back pain, indigestion, and shortness of breath, often without chest pain, occur more frequently in women. Any concerned woman should check with her doctor.

Although anyone can get heart disease, most people develop heart disease because of certain risks. People with high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and diabetes, as well as those who are overweight or obese, are at higher risk for heart disease. People who smoke or previously smoked are often at the highest risk. Stress and depression are also linked to heart disease.

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To decrease the risk of heart disease:

- Don't smoke and avoid secondhand smoke.
- Stay at a healthy weight.
- Get at least 150 minutes per week of exercise that raises the heart rate.
- Eat a healthy diet with more vegetables and fresh foods and less fats and processed foods.
- Work to decrease stress and get treatment for depression.
- Take all medications as prescribed for treating diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol.

There is an added bonus to heart disease prevention efforts. Strokes are the third most common cause of deaths in California, and most of what we can do to prevent heart disease will also prevent strokes.

Finally, talk with your doctor if you have any concerns about heart disease. Your doctor can talk to you about the best ways for you to prevent heart disease. If caught early, the impact of heart disease can be minimized. Even if damage has been done, medications are available to prevent more damage.

Remember, if someone is having a heart-related emergency **CALL 911** and wait for the ambulance. People having heart attacks often die while driving to or being driven to the hospital in private cars. Being smart about heart disease will save lives.

About Partnership HealthPlan of California (PHC)

PHC is a non-profit community based health care organization that contracts with the State to administer Medi-Cal benefits through local care providers ensuring Medi-Cal recipients have access to comprehensive, cost-effective health care. PHC provides quality health care to over 565,000 Medi-Cal members. Beginning in Solano County in 1994 PHC now provides services to 14 Northern California counties -- Del Norte, Humboldt, Lake, Lassen, Marin, Mendocino, Modoc, Napa, Shasta, Siskiyou, Solano, Sonoma, Trinity and Yolo.

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