
Women's Heart Disease Strongly Linked to Physical Inactivity Past Age 30



Women looking to lower their chances of developing cardiovascular disease have heard it before: maintain a healthy weight, keep blood pressure in check and quit smoking cigarettes. A study from the British Journal of Sports Medicine reveals that while smoking most strongly influenced disease development up to age 30, the most significant risk for women over the age of 30 comes from low levels of physical activity.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) sent out a reminder that heart disease kills people of all ages and is the leading cause of death in the United States as well as in many wealthy nations.

Four risk factors for heart disease in women

The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health follows female participants across their lifespan. For the recently published research, data was compiled for 32,254 women born between 1921 and 1978. Four primary risk factors for heart disease were compared: high body mass index (BMI), high blood pressure, smoking and physical inactivity. Together, these risk factors cause more than half of the cases of cardiovascular disease worldwide.

The research team first looked at the prevalence of the risk factors in the study population, using a mathematical equation to determine the proportion of heart disease that would disappear given the removal of a single risk factor. Prevalence data were then combined with relative risk data, to show how likely a woman is to develop cardiovascular disease if she meets one of the risk criteria, versus someone with no risk vulnerability.

Risk factors change with age

Findings revealed that the single biggest risk factor for heart disease in women younger than 30 is smoking. As women age, smoking prevalence falls; the researchers observed that 28 percent of the women aged 22 to 27 years smoked cigarettes, while smokers made up only 5 percent of women aged 73 to 78.

According to this study, the effect of the different risk factors change as a woman ages. From age 30 to 90, physical inactivity was the risk factor with the greatest influence on the women's heart disease development. The researchers suggest that 2,000 women in this age group would be spared annually in Australia if they adhered to the World Health Organisation's (WHO) recommendation of 150 minutes of moderate physical exercise per week.

Obesity is not the only issue

The study authors add that national programs, which promote physical activity, should do so across the lifespan, with particular attention devoted to the development of healthy habits in young adulthood. Smoking cessation is critically important to preventing diseases such as cancer and heart disease, but the benefits of moderate physical exercise are manifold. Not only does it reduce the risk of obesity and unhealthy levels of BMI, but it is the crucial factor for maintaining a healthy heart throughout one's life.

The Global Burden of Disease project contributed data, which was applied to the findings for the Australian study participants.

Source: British Journal of Sports Medicine <http://bjsm.bmj.com>

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