Heart disease and women: What you should know

Posted by Dr. Karen Kutoloski February 20, 2008 00:02AM

Heart disease and stroke are the No. 1 and No. 3 killers of women and are two of the many cardiovascular diseases that kill nearly 500,000 women each year. Cardiovascular disease (CVD) accounts for more deaths than the next seven causes of death in women combined, including all forms of cancer. Since 1984, men have experienced a decline in deaths due to CVD; women have not. Each year CVD kills 50,000 more women than men.

According to a recent study published in the Nov. 27 issue of the Journal of the American College of Cardiology (JACC), Heart Disease among women aged 35 to 54, the death rate increased 1.5 percent. In even younger women, aged 35 to 44, the rate of death from heart disease has been increasing by an average of 1.3 percent annually between 1997 and 2002.

Know Your Risk

Preventing heart disease in a woman requires assessing her lifetime risk. The lifetime risk of dying from cardiovascular disease is one in 2.6 for American females, which highlights the need for women and their healthcare providers to assess the risk of developing heart disease and take the necessary steps to prevent the disease by adopting a healthy lifestyle and treating any risk factors that may be present.

Change Your Lifestyle

Lifestyle recommendations include:

- Seek a healthy weight.
- Increase physical activity.
- Drink alcohol in moderation.
- Eat less salt and sodium-containing products.
- Include fresh fruits, vegetables and low-fat dairy products in diet.
- Stop smoking and seek counseling, or nicotine replacement to achieve that goal.
- Exercise an hour to 90 minutes a day to lose or maintain weight.
- Saturated fats should make up no more than 7 percent of calories each day.
- Eat oily fish such as salmon twice a week.

Talk to Your Doctor

Be certain that your doctor is aware to suspect heart disease in even young women and takes the necessary steps to prevent the disease by helping you adopt a
healthy lifestyle and treat any risk factors that may be present.

Treatment recommendations include:

• Women at high risk who have heart disease should try to reduce their low-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels below 70 mg/dL.

• Consider taking a supplement of EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and DHA (docosahexanoic acid) to control heart disease or high triglycerides.

• Drug therapies include recommendations of various antihypertensive and lipid lowering medications, diabetes management and use of aspirin.

Guidelines recommend against:

• Taking hormone replacement therapy or elective estrogen receptor modulators to prevent heart disease.

• Antioxidants such as vitamin E, C and beta-carotene have not been shown to prevent heart disease and should not be used a preventive agents.

Aspirin guidelines:

• Low-dose aspirin could be useful in women 65 years or older for prevention of stroke in situations where the benefits outweigh the risks.

• Women at high risk for heart disease can take as much as 325 mg per day, rather than the 162 mg per day previously recommended.

• However, women less than 65 years of age and who are healthy should not use aspirin to prevent a heart attack.

After decades of hard won progress in reducing heart-related deaths, it is worrisome that the rate of death from heart disease has been increasing in younger women. The risk is real, and women of any age should seek ways to reduce the risk that they will develop heart disease during their lives.