

## Women and Heart Disease

Heart disease is the leading killer of females in America. Heart disease kills more women than men each year, but females who survive fare much worse than their male counterparts. Yet many women fail to recognize the toll that cardiovascular disease (CVD) can take on their bodies, and thus fail to do what is necessary to reduce the risk of getting this largely preventable disease.



### **What is CVD, and what puts women at risk and how can you lower your risk?**

The term **cardiovascular disease** refers to any disease of the heart and its blood vessels. Generally speaking, CVD is an umbrella term that encompasses all conditions affecting the heart muscle itself, the valves of the heart and/or the blood vessels that supply the heart (i.e., coronary arteries).

**Vessel disease, or vascular disease**, includes diseases such as hypertension (high blood pressure) and **atherosclerosis** (hardening of the arteries caused by the formation of plaque deposits within the arterial wall). Atherosclerosis of the coronary arteries is the main culprit behind chest pain (**angina**) and heart attack (**myocardial infarction**). Although the condition is not usually dangerous until middle age and beyond, atherosclerosis typically begins to develop in childhood.

### **Educate Yourself About Your Risk**

Minimize your CVD risk by learning about risk factors such as:

- elevated total and LDL (low-density lipoprotein) cholesterol levels
- low HDL (high-density lipoprotein) cholesterol levels
- obesity
- smoking
- hypertension
- sedentary lifestyles
- poor diet
- stress and depression
- family history of premature CVD
- middle age diabetes

The more risk factors that are present, the higher the risk of atherosclerosis and subsequent heart attack or stroke.

### **Talk to your Doctor**

A simple preventive health checkup and a blood draw in the lab can arm you with the information needed to determine your specific risk. Ask your doctor questions such as:

- What is my risk for Heart Disease?
- What is my blood pressure reading?
- What does this reading mean for me, and what do I need to do about it?
- What are my cholesterol numbers?
- What do these numbers mean for me, and what do I need to do about them?