

The TRUTH About African American Women and Heart Disease



The TRUTH is African American women are at risk for heart disease!

Heart disease is the leading cause of death for African American women in the United States. If you are in your 40s, or 30s, or even 20s, you may be at risk.

But here's some good news — You have the power to protect your heart and lower your risk. Yes, YOU!

What is Heart Disease?

Heart disease is a general phrase for a variety of conditions that affect the heart's structure and function. The most common form, **coronary heart disease**, occurs when plaque (a combination of fat, cholesterol, calcium, and other substances found in the blood) builds up in your arteries.

Plaque reduces the amount of oxygen-rich blood getting to your heart and can cause a heart attack when blood flow becomes blocked. If blood flow is not restored quickly, the heart muscle will begin to die.

Coronary heart disease is slightly more prevalent among African American women than among white women aged 20 and older. Like most heart diseases, coronary heart disease is a lifelong condition—once you get it, you'll always have it. What's more, the condition of your blood vessels will steadily worsen unless you make healthy changes in your daily habits.

For African American women, the risk of heart disease is especially great.

Why? African American women typically have higher rates of health conditions—such as high blood pressure, overweight and obesity, and diabetes—that increase the risk of heart disease.



More than half of African American women aged 20 and older have hypertension, also known as high blood pressure.



More than half of African American women aged 20 and older have obesity.



African American women are **more likely** than white women to be diagnosed with diabetes.



Are You Aware of the Risks?

Only about one-third of African American women know **cardiovascular disease** is their most significant health risk. It's important to know your risk factors. Risk factors are conditions or habits that increase the chances of developing a disease or having it worsen. **Every risk factor counts.** Having more than one risk factor is especially serious because risk factors tend to impact and worsen each other's effects.

Risk factors for heart disease include:

- Having high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, or obesity
- Eating a diet high in sodium, saturated fats, and sugars
- Being a smoker or regularly exposed to secondhand smoke
- Not being physically active
- Not getting enough sleep
- Not managing stress

Disparities in Heart Disease

African American women often face disparities in healthcare access and quality, which can affect heart disease outcomes. Living in neighborhoods with little access to healthy foods, poor quality housing, and few gyms, community centers or walking paths increase the chances of heart disease.




It's never too early to start protecting your heart. The choices you make now will affect your heart health for the rest of your life.




What Can You Do to Start Taking Care of Your Heart?




Yes, YOU can keep your heart healthy.

 **Start by learning more about your own heart health, your family history of heart disease, and your risk factors.**


- Even if heart disease runs in your family, that doesn't mean you have to get it. There's a lot you can do to reduce your risk.

 **Keep a record of your daily food intake and physical activity to help you identify barriers to healthy habits. This can inspire you to reach your goals.**


- Try modifying favorite dishes by using olive oil and herbs instead of butter and salt. Consider healthier alternatives in culturally popular soul food recipes, like vegan options, which use less saturated fat and more plants and nuts.

 **Make a realistic plan that fits your specific needs and helps you stick to a heart-healthy lifestyle.**


- If you think you're too busy for exercise, try fitting small amounts of physical activity—even 10 minutes at a time—into your day.
- Anything that gets your heart pumping counts! Being physically active can reduce your risk for heart disease.

 **Managing stress will help you be more motivated to accomplish your heart health goals.**

- African American women often face higher levels of long-term stress.
- Experiencing chronic discrimination can increase the risk of high blood pressure in African Americans.
- Find healthy ways to reduce stress, such as practicing yoga, joining a dance class, or simply taking deep breaths.

 **Prepare to have a healthy pregnancy.**

- African American women have a higher risk of developing gestational diabetes and preeclampsia—a type of high blood pressure that occurs during pregnancy.
- It is important to keep track of your blood pressure before, during, and after pregnancy.
- Having preeclampsia increases the risk of having heart disease or a stroke later in life.
- Talk to your healthcare provider about how to have a heart-healthy pregnancy.

 **Involve friends and family to make activities more enjoyable, whether you're joining a fitness class or just taking a walk in the park.**

- If being accountable to someone who cares about you is a motivating factor, exercise or eat healthy together!



Yes, YOU can work with your healthcare provider to find out your risk of heart disease.

- **Visit your healthcare provider** for regular checkups. Ask your provider to review your blood pressure, cholesterol, blood sugar, and body mass index (BMI) numbers with you to be sure you fully understand them.
- **Ask important questions** about whether these numbers are in a healthy range or if they put you at risk for heart disease—and if so, what you can do to reduce your risk. Let your provider know you want help in achieving your goal of having a healthy heart. The more proactive you are about your heart health, the greater chance you have of preventing heart disease.



✓ Here is a list of questions you can ask:

- What is my healthy weight range?
- What was my blood pressure reading today and what do the numbers mean for me?
- How often should I have my blood pressure checked?
- What do my blood pressure numbers mean for me if I'm pregnant or thinking of becoming pregnant?
- Can any medicines I take (prescribed or over-the-counter) affect my blood pressure?
- How much physical activity do I need to keep my heart healthy?
- What foods or diets can help keep my heart healthy?
- How can managing stress affect my heart health?
- What risk factors do I have for heart disease?
- Is there anything I can do to change or lower these risks?
- How can cholesterol affect my heart health? What are my cholesterol levels and are they in a healthy range?
- If I smoke or drink, how does it affect my heart health?
- If I have a family history for heart disease, what does that mean for me?

Use the [My Heart Health Tracker](#) to record important numbers related to your heart health.

✓ **Yes, YOU can start today!**

The Heart Truth® is here to help you reach your heart health goals.

For more information about **The Heart Truth**, heart disease in women, and tools to help you create a heart-healthy lifestyle check out hearttruth.gov. Find additional resources from our [Healthy Hearts Network](#) organizations.