



# 6 Clues to Your Heart Health

Cardiovascular disease is the number-one killer of women, and it's striking more at a younger age than ever before—which is why you need to pay attention now. In this exclusive excerpt from *Dr. Suzanne Steinbaum's Heart Book*, find out what's behind the rise and how best to assess (and lower!) your own odds.

Something strange is happening to young women's hearts. I first became aware of it years ago, before I even went into cardiology. I had a summer job assisting the only doctor on Block Island, a picturesque little piece of land just off the coast of Rhode Island. It's a popular vacation spot, with gorgeous beaches, lighthouses, and magnificent vistas. Each day, quaint ferries drop off their loads of tourists.

I expected to learn a lot about Lyme disease that summer, along with treating sunburns, scraped knees, and fishing-hook injuries. But those were far from being the only problems that came through the door. All season long I had a parade of seemingly healthy women in their 30s and 40s walking in complaining of chest pain, palpitations, exhaustion, and other heart symptoms.

The doctor and I performed the routine tests on each patient, but in every case the results were normal. What was up? Why would these outwardly fit, often wealthy, toned, and vacationing women have any issues with their hearts?

The only common denominator I could find was that all of them had stressful lives. They were busy, overextended, and playing multiple roles. But as soon as they went on a holiday—when the frenetic pace of their lives came to a grinding halt and they were expected to “just relax”—they fell apart. All the stress hormones in their bloodstream that had been propelling them through their frantic days suddenly had no outlet, so those chemicals started wreaking havoc. The result: racing

hearts, rising blood pressure, and chest pain.

I now recognize that I was sensing a new kind of heart disease, one that is affecting a different group of women: the first generation to grow up after Gloria Steinem and other feminists changed the role of women in society. We have reaped the benefits of women's liberation, but no one prepared us for what it really means to do everything and also take care of ourselves. Sometimes things fall through the cracks—important things, like our health!

In fact, we take our hearts for granted to such an extent that most women don't even realize they could be at risk. In one study, a large group of

from now—is the time to take action.

## Heart Throbs: The Key to Your Future

Traditionally, doctors have focused on risk factors like high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and smoking. But there's a problem with that approach: While these things are important, a lot of them are already major signs of heartsickness.

When you have high cholesterol, that isn't a sign that you might get sick; it's a sign you already are.

Instead, I want to talk about something I call

***The key is becoming aware of your risks, no matter how young you are and no matter how healthy you feel.***

women were asked whether they knew that heart disease was the number-one killer of women. Ninety percent said yes, which is great. But when each of those same women were asked whether heart disease was *her* problem, only 13 percent said yes. There is a huge disconnect here. We know the risk, but we don't know *our* risk, so we don't take it seriously until it happens to us.

Here's the thing every woman needs to realize: When you have heart disease, it started decades before you were diagnosed. The key is becoming aware of your risks, no matter how young you are and no matter how healthy you feel, so you can determine whether now—rather than decades

“heart throbs.” The way I use the term, they're a measure of your vitality and future health. Here are six that you should be aware of right now.

### 1/How Much You Really Drink

When I ask women if they drink, they often say things like, “No, only one to three glasses of wine with dinner every night.” That sounds like drinking to me! Even though you've probably heard a little bit of alcohol can be good for your heart, excessive consumption is much more dangerous than abstaining. It can cause heart palpitations in some people, raise blood pressure, and damage your liver as



well as your heart. When I recommend a glass of wine a day, I'm not telling you to run right out and start tying one on. If sipping a single Bordeaux with your whole-grain pasta and fresh vegetables works for you, then, “Cheers!” But remember that one serving is just 4 to 6 ounces (or 2 ounces of hard liquor).

### 2/The State of Your Hormones

I'm seeing more and more women who battle serious

premenstrual or menopausal symptoms, as well as those who are surprised to discover they're infertile. I believe a woman's cycle is like the canary in the coal mine: It's often the first hint that something is going wrong. And yet many doctors don't take this into consideration when assessing heart disease risk. You should regularly track your hormonal issues, including your menstrual cycles, pregnancies (for instance, did you have prenatal problems like

elevations in sugar or blood pressure?), and miscarriages. Think of any glitches as a warning to pay closer attention to your heart health and other risk factors.

### 3/How Fast Your Heart Beats

The heart needs to be relaxed and able to passively fill with blood, like a balloon—and hearts that beat less often are more efficient at this process. Many doctors consider a resting heart rate too high if

it's more than 100 beats per minute, but my standard is stricter: I feel it shouldn't be over 70. The perfect resting heart rate, in my opinion, is between 50 and 70 beats per minute; a marathon runner whose heart is highly conditioned might have a rate as low as 40. Take your resting heart rate right after you wake up in the morning, before you get out of bed. Find your pulse at your wrist or neck and count it for 15 seconds, then multiply that number by four.

### 4/Where You Carry Excess Weight

Some people feel that body mass index (BMI) is not accurate enough, but I believe it's a good tool for gauging your body fat.

(Go to [shape.com/BMI](http://shape.com/BMI) to calculate yours.) Even if your BMI is fairly normal, look at yourself in the mirror. Where do you carry any extra weight? If it's in your butt, you're much better off (so try not to complain too much!). Abdominal obesity is riskier because belly fat behaves differently than fat in other parts of your body, triggering the release of a slew of hormones and chemicals that are associated with heart disease. Excess abdominal fat has been linked to higher triglycerides, pre-diabetes, and inflammation.

### 5/Your Hidden Family History

The traditional risk-factor analysis looks for heart disease in your father before age 55 and in your mother before age 65. But this is not the end of the story in my book; what happened before a fatal heart attack

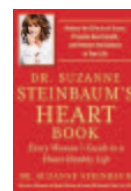
is also important. I've had patients whose parents didn't die of a heart attack until after age 60, but when I ask more questions, I find out that many of them had first suffered from strokes, angina, mild heart attacks, or acute coronary syndromes years before they had a massive or fatal heart attack. Those count too. Also look at your extended family. If Great Aunt Stephanie or Cousin Joshua died at 45 and you don't know the cause, find it out. Maybe nobody talked about causes of death back then, but the information matters to you now.

### 6/The Amount of Sleep You Get

Your risk of heart disease goes way up if you get less than six hours or more than nine hours. We still need more research to understand why this is so—for instance, does extra sleep translate to fewer hours of exercise, or is something else involved? But meanwhile, you should aim for the heart-healthy “sleep sweet spot” of seven to eight hours. (For more on getting good rest, see page 138.)

Remember, your health is in your hands, and you have the power to live a full, vital, long life. I promise, you can do it. Let's start making some changes.

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Adapted from *Dr. Suzanne Steinbaum's Heart Book* by Dr. Suzanne Steinbaum, to be published by Avery, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc. on January 24, 2013. Copyright © by Suzanne Steinbaum

## FEED YOUR HEART WELL

“A healthy diet is one of the most powerful weapons against cardiovascular disease,” says Rachel K. Johnson, Ph.D., R.D., a spokesperson for the American Heart Association. Aim for a wide variety of produce, since various fruits and vegetables provide different protective antioxidants. Whole grains like barley are also key, because they contain soluble fiber that helps lower LDL cholesterol, says Johnson. As for protein, most should come from lean sources, such as egg whites, poultry, and omega-3-rich fish like salmon.

—BARBARA BRODY

