

Ask The Doc

By Sheniqua Faulkner

> Heart disease is one of the greatest health threats American women face. Each year, one in three women die from complications of heart disease according to the American Heart Association. Stroke, heart attack, diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure are all forms of heart disease.

In recognition of American Heart Month, we spoke to St. Louis M.D. Melissa Hollie, a board certified family physician, about ways women can prevent heart disease and care for their cardiovascular health.

Dr. Hollie, whose father was affected by heart disease when she was studying at Saint Louis University School of Medicine, has a vested interest in her patients' heart health. She shares five ways we can keep ours in good shape—preventative measures that are simpler than managing the diseases themselves.



1. EAT FOR YOUR HEART.

Most people know that a diet high in fatty, deep-fried foods is not healthy, and assume avoiding or lowering their intake of these types of foods is sufficient in maintaining a healthy heart. Dr. Hollie adds that refined sugars, high levels of salt and excessive alcohol should also be avoided. While people are busy cutting back, they might overlook the fact that they should also be adding foods to their diet. These include colorful fruits and veggies, whole grains and fish rich in heart-healthy omega-3s. Dr. Hollie also recommends proper hydration—sip at least 64 ounces of water each day. Can't guzzle that much? Water-rich foods (there are those fruits and veggies again!) count!



2. KEEP AN EYE ON YOUR BMI.

Your Body Mass Index is a great tool to help you recognize when your body fat percentage is inching into unhealthy territory. Obesity increases the risk of atherosclerosis, the fatty buildup that can narrow artery walls, which can cause stroke or heart attack. Dr. Hollie says your doc can check your BMI or you can calculate your own online at cdc.gov.

4. START MOVING.

Your heart is a muscle, and like any, it works at its best when it's well conditioned. Additionally, exercise helps maintain or lower weight, an important factor in preventing heart disease. "You should be getting cardiovascular exercise three to five times per week for at least 30 minutes," advises Dr. Hollie. After that, work up to fitting in physical activity every day. The calming effect exercise provides is an added benefit since high stress a risk factor in heart disease.

3. STOP SMOKING.

Or don't start if you're already a non-smoker. Tobacco usage in any form—including secondhand smoke—can damage the delicate vessels and tissue of the heart. The laundry list of chemicals in tobacco products such as carbon monoxide and nicotine decrease blood oxygen and increase blood pressure, forcing your heart to work harder. "If you use tobacco while taking oral contraceptives, you greatly increase your risk of heart disease," says Dr. Hollie. "If you take birth control pills and smoke, tell your doctor. It's important to have her check your blood pressure at your yearly exam."

Quit today, and 365 days from now, your heart will have dramatically repaired itself, no matter how many years you used tobacco.

5. TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.

"Women tend to be the caretakers in their households and often neglect or overlook their own health," Dr. Hollie says. "They will take everyone else in their family to the doctor before themselves." Women should recognize that they will be better equipped to take care of their loved ones by keeping themselves healthy. The important screenings for women to ask for at the doc are blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Beyond the numbers and tests, don't be afraid to ask your doctor questions or get advice. Don't be afraid to speak up!



ABOUT THE DOC Melissa Hollie, MD, is the founder and director of Aesthetic Medical Associates, a private practice located in the Central West End. Dr. Hollie, a native St. Louisan, attended Saint Louis University School of Medicine and completed her residency in Family Practice at St. John's Mercy Health Center. She is now a

board-certified Family Physician and an Assistant Clinical Professor in the Department of Community and Family Medicine at Saint Louis University School of Medicine. For more information or to book an appointment with Dr. Hollie, call 314.652.8923 or log on to cwemedical.com.