



Love Your Heart

Most women have at least one risk factor for heart disease—including a family history—but don't even realize it. Find out what to ask Mom and Dad, and which little lifestyle changes can make a big difference.

BY LESLIE PEPPER

When it comes to heart disease, what runs in your family matters—a lot. Studies show that if one of your parents had a heart attack or stroke, your own risk for those conditions can double, and having a brother or sister with the disease ups your chances of having a heart attack, too. But the incredibly empowering news is this: According to the American Heart Association, 80 percent of heart attacks and strokes can be prevented through lifestyle changes. So while you can't change your genes, you *can* change your everyday habits. "It isn't a single gene that contributes to heart disease, but more a combination of nature and nurture," says Sharonne N. Hayes, M.D., founder of the Mayo Clinic Women's Heart Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. "You can overcome a bad family history by making the right choices."

The big four are exercising daily, eating well, managing stress, and not smoking. Combined with staying at a healthy weight, keeping tabs on your cholesterol, triglycerides, and blood pressure, and getting all the right screenings, adopting healthy habits can substantially lower your risk. Sound like a tall order? Know that small changes can absolutely lead to big results, and that overhauling your lifestyle all at once isn't required.

Read on to learn how one woman is combating a family history of heart disease, as well as what you can do in every decade to keep your heart strong for life.

Beating heart disease together

Paula Chavez's grandparents both died young of heart disease. Her father had a heart attack in his 30s and, years later, he died of a second heart attack. That spurred Paula into action. She would not suffer the same fate as her dad. And neither would the rest of her family.



Paula Chavez
AS AN AMERICAN
HEART ASSOCIATION
GO RED FOR WOMEN
VOLUNTEER, SHE'S
HELPING ALL WOMEN
TAKE CHARGE OF
THEIR HEART HEALTH.

Growing up, my family was big into sports. And by “big into sports” I mean watching them on television while munching on chips and dip. My heritage is half Latino and half Middle Eastern, so there was always a lot of bread, meat, and fried foods on the table. I never even ate a piece of lettuce until college!

My father had had a heart attack when he was 35 years old, and from that moment on he took medication. But his health habits stayed the same. He ate a lot of fried food and he stressed over little things. He had bypass surgery about 12 years ago, but that still didn't prompt him to change his lifestyle.

I got married right after I left home and had my first child soon afterward. My husband and I were both working, so takeout pizza and Chinese were staples in our house. And soda. A lot of soda. After I had my second child, taking care of myself dropped even further on my list of priorities.

Every year my weight crept up, and it got to a point where I didn't want to look at myself in the mirror. Then, about three years ago, I went for a physical. The scale revealed the hard—and heavy—truth: I was 220 pounds. The doctor's face turned deadly serious. He looked me in the eye and said: “You have high cholesterol, and you have a family history of heart disease. Either you change your ways, or I'm going to have to put you on medication.” I realized that I was headed down the same unhealthy path as my father, and I didn't want to be on medication at 32 years old.

So I began to slowly change my eating habits. I stopped going to drive-throughs and instead collected low-fat, low-salt recipes from books and magazines and cooked healthy dinners on most nights.

I was way too embarrassed to set foot inside a gym, so I began to exercise with DVD workouts at home. When I became pregnant with my third child, I continued to eat well and exercise as much as I could.

A few days after I gave birth to my son, my dad passed away from a second heart attack. That's when it hit me. *My dad could be here, playing with my children.*

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Why your genes matter—and what you can do

Knowing your family's medical history—and discussing it with your doctor—will help your doctor recommend lifestyle changes as well as what screenings to get and when. So grab a pen and paper and start interviewing Mom, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa, and everyone in between. Find out if anyone in your family has or had:

HEART DISEASE

If your dad had a heart attack before age 50, your odds of having one double, and if your mom was younger than 60, your risk goes up by 70 percent. In addition to heart attacks, find out whether anyone in your family has experienced a stroke, heart failure, a heart rhythm disorder, an aneurysm, or angina.

HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

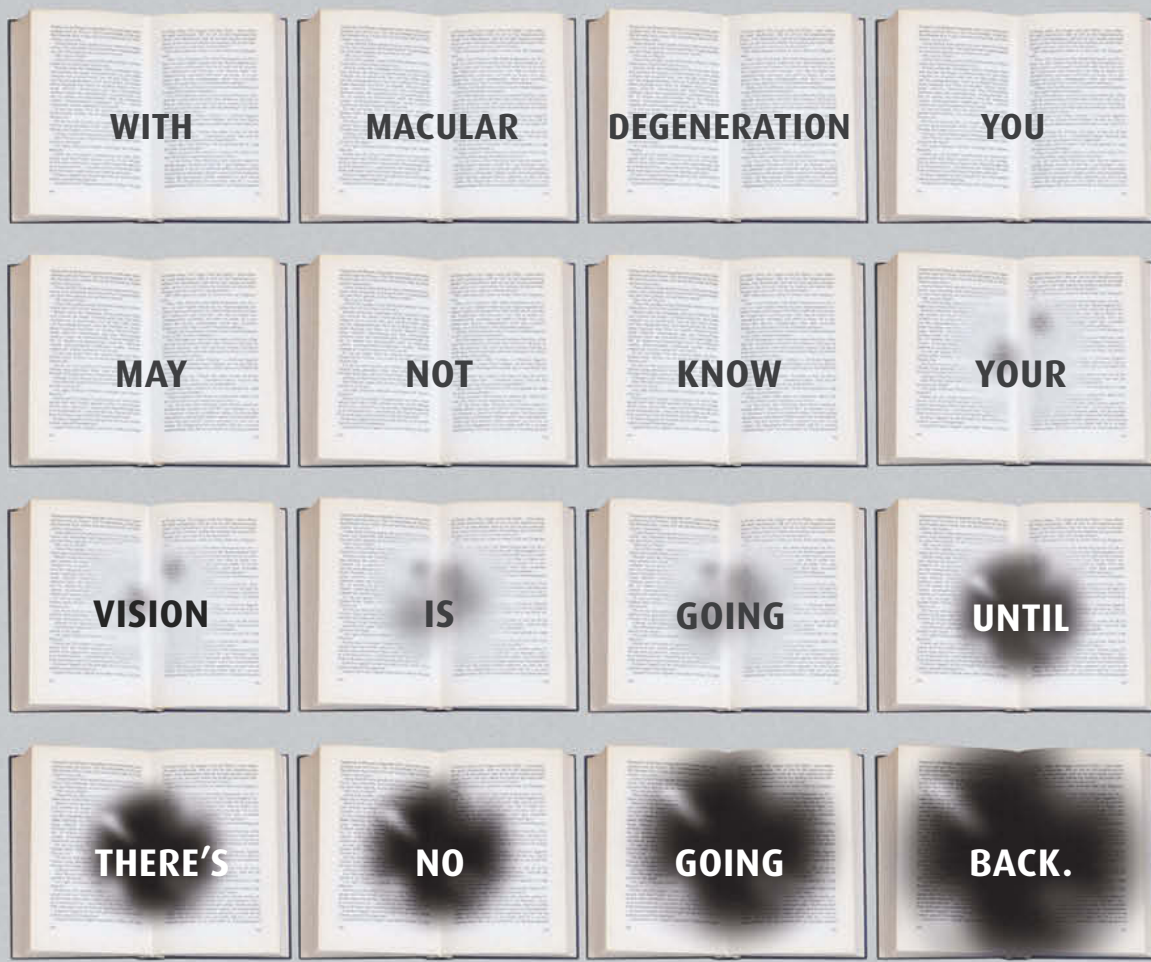
If one or more first-degree family members (mother, father, siblings) have high blood pressure before the age of 60, your risk increases twofold, says Ann Bolger, M.D., a spokesperson for the American Heart Association. Because hypertension can damage your heart and blood vessels over time, your doctor will want to monitor your numbers closely.

TYPE 2 DIABETES

High blood sugar can damage your heart and major blood vessels, so people with diabetes are at an increased risk for heart attack or stroke. One parent with diabetes raises your own risk, and both parents with the condition is a real doozy, almost doubling your chances. If you have a family history of diabetes, ask your doctor about a hemoglobin A1c test, which measures your average blood glucose levels over a period of up to three months.



PHOTO: (FAMILY) ISTOCK

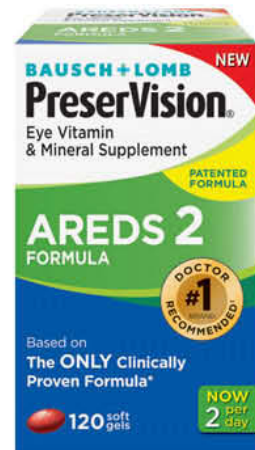


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He died of something that maybe, just maybe, could have been prevented.

I decided right then that I would honor his memory by losing my pregnancy weight and then some. I kept up with my healthy eating and exercise, and within a year, I lost 80 pounds in total.

My life is completely different now. We cook all our meals at home, and I pack lunch for everybody. I always tell my kids, "Make sure there's some color on your plate." We started a vegetable garden in the backyard, and we grow kale, zucchini, cucumbers, and lettuce. It's more fun to cook something you've grown yourself.

My 10-year-old daughter tried several sports and decided on soccer. She practices two to three times a week, and it's wonderful to see. And I know this sounds crazy, but I'm now a fitness instructor!

I've been getting my mom into the spirit, too. She splits her time between my house and my brother's, and when she's here she walks on my treadmill 30 minutes every morning. She didn't like exercise at first, but she realized she needs to be in good shape to keep up with my kids.

Even my husband has changed. He used to grab a beer and watch baseball after work. Now he goes for a run or we go for a family walk.

I've taken on a mission: I am not going to be another victim of heart disease in my family. My dad had a lot more living to do, and he didn't get that chance. I'm not going to let that happen to me—or anyone else in my family.

Heart healthy at every age

You're truly never too young or too old to protect your heart.

"The buildup of plaque in your arteries can silently start as early as your late teens and early 20s," explains Jennifer H. Mieres, M.D., professor of cardiology and population health and senior vice president, Office of Community and Public Health, at the North Shore-LIJ Health System. Lower your odds of developing heart disease by keeping an eye on these key factors and lifestyle habits in your 30s, 40s, 50s, and beyond:

30s

Butt out "Cigarette smoking more than doubles a woman's odds for developing coronary heart disease," says Nieca Goldberg, M.D., medical director of the Joan H. Tisch Center for Women's Health in New York City. Within one year of quitting, your risk decreases by 50 percent.

Move more The American Heart Association recommends at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity—that's brisk walking, biking, or dancing—at least five days a week. If you can't spare that half-hour all at once, 10 to 15 minutes at a time works, too. Also aim for 20 minutes of strength training twice a week. This helps you build muscle and keep your metabolism revved.

Keep track of your pregnancy Gestational diabetes or preeclampsia (high blood pressure during pregnancy) raises the risk of diabetes or heart disease later in life. Make sure your regular doctor makes note of these conditions in your medical history. A related concern: Polycystic ovarian syndrome also raises your risk for developing heart disease.

Make sleep a priority Your heart needs its z's. Research shows that people who slept fewer than six hours a night were twice as likely as to experience a stroke or heart attack as those getting six to eight hours of shut-eye.

Know your numbers At your annual checkup, make sure your doctor checks your cholesterol and blood pressure.

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DID YOU KNOW?

Getting medical attention within one hour of having a heart attack can reduce the risk of dying by 50 percent.

Know the signs of a heart attack

Recognizing the symptoms is crucial to getting help ASAP, and every minute matters.

Keep in mind what while chest pain is a telltale sign, women are more likely than men to have other symptoms, too. Call 911 immediately if you experience:

- >> **HEAVY, CONTINUOUS CHEST DISCOMFORT** that could feel like pressure and/or shortness of breath.
- >> **UNEXPLAINED NAUSEA**, vomiting, or sweating.
- >> **SHARP PAIN** in the neck, back, or jaw.

For more help figuring out your heart disease risk, go to GoRedForWomen.org/HeartCheckUp.

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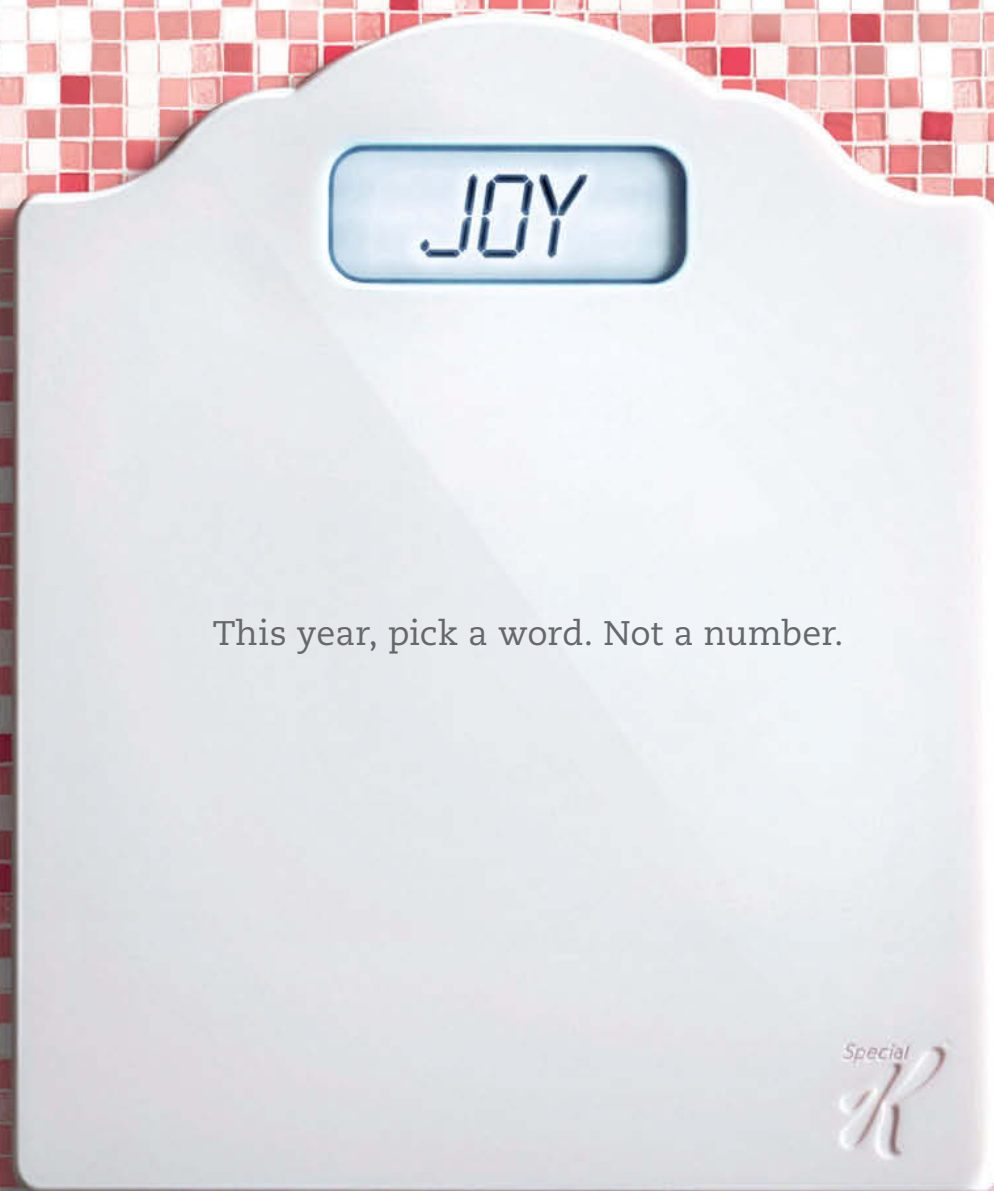
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40s



DID YOU KNOW? Heart disease kills more women than all forms of cancer combined.

Take a 10-minute time-out You might be feeling double-whammy stress from caring for kids and aging parents. Unchecked stress can lead to high blood pressure, higher cholesterol, and artery damage, so incorporate relaxation techniques into your daily routine, whether you do meditation, yoga, or easy deep breathing.

Have a baseline electrocardiogram This test checks your heart rate and the strength of electrical signals as they pass through your heart's chambers. Ask your doctor for one around age 45.

Keep tabs on cholesterol As you approach perimenopause, your numbers can change. Declining estrogen levels can cause LDL and triglycerides to increase and HDL to drop.

Check for diabetes Start at 45 and, if results are normal, retest every three years, Goldberg says.

Remember the hormone connection Recent research from Johns Hopkins University found that women who go through menopause before age 50 are at an increased risk of heart disease. Discuss the menopause-heart disease link with your regular health care provider.

50s+

Tell your doctor about any unusual fatigue One study of more than 1,500 female heart attack survivors found that the majority had symptoms months before the event. The most common sign was unexplained fatigue that interfered with everyday activities, for example, having to rest between making sides of the bed. Describe to your physician how fatigue impacts your daily activities rather than just reporting that you're tired, advises Jean McSweeney, Ph.D., R.N., associate dean for research at the College of Nursing, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences.

Fine-tune your diet "You may not be as efficient at metabolizing starch and sugar as you get closer to menopause," Goldberg says. The American Heart Association recommends limiting your intake of added sugars to lower your heart disease risk. Also cut back on simple carbs—like pretzels and other packaged snacks—as well as processed foods, which are high in sodium. And eat plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and at least two 3½-oz. servings a week of oily fish like salmon.

Test for C-reactive protein Women who have elevated levels of C-reactive protein, a measure of inflammation in the blood, might benefit from going on cholesterol-lowering therapies, even if their cholesterol is normal, Goldberg says.

Maintain your social network Research has found that strong social ties can help ward off heart disease, says Kathi L. Heffner, Ph.D., assistant professor of psychiatry at The Rochester Center for Mind-Body Research, University of Rochester Medical Center. Make time to see loved ones at least once a week. And consider forging new connections by joining a local club of your interest or doing volunteer work—at a soup kitchen or community garden, for example. Studies show the more varied your network is, the healthier you'll be. ■

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