



February is American Heart Month. This year's theme is *My Heart, My Voice*.

## Listen to Your Heart for Optimal Health

Listening to your heart, expressing your physical and emotional health needs, and feeling heard are important aspects of well-being.

To mark American Heart Month (February 2024), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [Division for Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention](#) launched a *My Heart, My Voice* campaign to help save lives. The

campaign is aimed particularly at women to inform them about the dangers of delayed recognition of symptoms, diagnosis and treatment for heart attacks and other cardiac events.

The *My Heart, My Voice* campaign also calls attention to "disparity gaps" that limit access to care due to gender, race, ethnicity and other social factors. Efforts to close these gaps largely rely on hearing from and responding to the needs of men and women from all walks of life about optimal ways to support their physical and emotional health.

### Heart Disease

Heart disease is the leading cause of death for Americans. Surveys show that many women are not aware of their risk and that they may experience more subtle symptoms than men.

A heart attack (myocardial infarction) occurs when the heart muscle is deprived of blood. Heart attack signs and symptoms may include:

- Chest pain or discomfort
- Dizziness or shortness of breath
- Pain or discomfort in the jaw, neck, back, arm or shoulder
- Feeling nauseous, light-headed or unusually tired
- Fluttering in the chest (palpitations)

Common types of heart disease include coronary artery disease, which occurs when plaque blocks the flow of blood in arteries; arrhythmia, when the heart beats in an irregular way; and heart failure, when the heart cannot pump enough blood to supply other organs in the body. In addition to other symptoms, swelling of the feet, ankles, legs or abdomen may be a sign of heart disease.

In 2020, [the American Heart Association reported](#) that women had a 20 percent higher risk for heart failure

than men or for dying within five years of having a severe heart attack. Women were also found to be older and have more risk factors and more complicated medical histories than men at the time of their heart attacks.

Women of all ages have also been found to be more likely than men to experience symptoms that they might dismiss as “Maybe I’m coming down with the flu,” “I strained my back,” “I must have eaten something that was off,” or “I’m just worn out and need to rest.”

A heart attack is a medical emergency that requires a 911 response. Don’t hesitate if you have symptoms and can call for help. To be prepared to help others, take a cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) course and learn how to use an automated external defibrillator (AED) before emergency responders arrive. Prompt intervention saves lives.

## Risk Factors

Risk factors for cardiovascular disease shared by both men and women include smoking, obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and family history. Additional risk factors include metabolic syndrome (co-occurring high blood pressure, obesity, and high glucose and triglyceride levels) and high levels of C-reactive protein (a sign of inflammatory disease), according to Johns Hopkins Medicine and its Women’s Cardiovascular Health Center.

Some risk factors that relate specifically to women or that can affect women disproportionately include:

- Reproductive health status, pregnancy and childbirth
- Relatively high testosterone levels prior to menopause
- Increasing hypertension during menopause
- Autoimmune diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis
- Stress-related disorders
- Depression (twice as common among woman than men)

Certain behaviors and lifestyle choices affect cardiovascular health. For example, not smoking, limiting alcohol, having a nutritious diet, getting regular exercise and following consistent sleep habits are heart-healthy practices. In addition, Americans are advised to check their blood pressure on a routine basis. Undetected hypertension is a leading risk factor for heart disease, stroke and kidney failure, and it is linked to dementia.

## Emotional Invalidation

The heart is a symbol of love and other deeply felt emotions. People can suffer ill effects when their heartfelt thoughts and expressed needs are disregarded, dismissed or minimized by others. This is referred to as emotional invalidation.

The health consequences of emotional invalidation can be serious. Repeated episodes of invalidation can contribute to feelings of helplessness and a diminished sense of self-worth. In an attempt to gain validation, the person might engage in people-pleasing behaviors and have difficulty upholding boundaries to take care of their own needs. Loss of trust in others, anger, anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation are also associated with emotional invalidation.

Emotional distress can manifest as physical symptoms such as tension headaches or migraine; loss of appetite or upset stomach; muscle tightness, aches and pains; fatigue and sleep disturbances. Without validation, a person’s immune system can become suppressed and increase susceptibility to contagious illnesses.

Not surprisingly, emotional invalidation can also cause cardiovascular symptoms such as rapid heart rate or elevated blood pressure. It’s important to get regular physical and mental health checkups to protect your heart.