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February is Heart Health Month!

Heart disease is the number one killer of women in the United States, and in the Lower Naugatuck Valley it accounts for 33% of all deaths. Between 1995 and 1997, about 150 Valley women died each year from heart disease (this is a rate of 325 deaths per 100,000 women). During the same time period, about 19 women died each year from breast cancer (a rate of 40 deaths per 100,000). This means that in the Valley 8 times more women died of heart disease than breast cancer. These facts show that if you are a woman and you live in the Valley, statistically you have a one in three chance of dying from heart disease. In contrast, breast cancer accounts for only 4.25% of deaths.

Heart disease differs between women and men. Women develop heart disease later in life than men. This is because estrogen in women's bodies protects us from heart disease. After menopause, when our bodies no longer produce estrogen, this protection is gone and we are at as great a risk as men.

For some postmenopausal women, hormone replacement therapy (HRT) may be an appropriate way to lower the risk of heart disease. However, HRT is not a treatment for existing heart disease. The estrogen in HRT increases HDL (good cholesterol), lowers LDL (bad cholesterol), and has other protective actions against heart disease. However, HRT is beneficial only for some women and can have serious risks.

Women may experience earlier symptoms than men but they may not be recognized by the woman or her doctor. This is because women's symptoms may be more subtle, such as non-severe chest pain, fatigue, nausea, abdominal pain, a feeling of indigestion, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, weakness, or jaw pain.

So what does this mean? Although heart disease is a very serious condition that kills one third of our population, it is preventable. By controlling risk factors, such as blood pressure and cholesterol, you can impact your chance of getting heart disease. Poor diet, lack of physical activity, and smoking contribute greatly to the development of heart disease.

Talk to your doctor about *your* risks for heart disease. Monitor your cholesterol and blood pressure and consider using diet and lifestyle as your primary means of prevention.