

# THE *Heart* TRUTH



## THE HEART TRUTH FOR LATINAS: AN ACTION PLAN

When you hear the term “heart disease,” what’s your first reaction? Like many women, you may think, “That’s a man’s disease.” But here’s *The Heart Truth*: Heart disease is the #1 killer of Latinas in the United States. Together with stroke, heart disease accounts for a third of all deaths among Latinas—cancer, the second-leading cause of death, accounts for about a fifth.

Latinas also have high rates of some factors that increase the risk of developing heart disease, such as diabetes, overweight and obesity, and physical inactivity.

But there’s good news too: You can take action and lower your chance of developing heart disease and its risk factors. In fact, women can lower their heart disease risk by as much as 82 percent just by leading a healthy lifestyle. This fact sheet gives steps you can take to protect your heart health.

### WHAT IS HEART DISEASE?

Coronary heart disease is the most common form of heart disease. Often referred to simply as “heart disease,” it is a disorder of the blood vessels of the heart that can lead to a heart attack. It is a lifelong condition and will steadily worsen unless you make changes in your daily habits.

### Risk Factors for Heart Disease

Lifestyle affects many of the “risk factors” for heart disease. Risk factors are conditions or habits that increase the chances of developing a disease or having it worsen. For heart disease, there are two types of risk factors—those you can’t change and those you can. The ones you can’t

change are a family history of early heart disease and age, which for women is a risk factor at 55. That’s because, after menopause, women are more likely to get heart disease. Partly, this is because their body no longer produces estrogen. Also, middle age is a time when women tend to develop other heart disease risk factors.

But most of the heart disease risk factors can be controlled. Often, all it takes are lifestyle changes; sometimes, medication also is needed. Here’s a quick review of these risk factors:

**Smoking.** There’s no safe way to smoke. But quit and, just one year later, your heart disease risk will drop by more than half. It’s not easy to quit but make a plan and you can do it. Or, try an organized program or medication—ask your doctor if either is right for you.

**High Blood Pressure.** Also called hypertension, high blood pressure increases your risk of heart disease, stroke, and congestive heart failure. Even levels slightly above normal—called “prehypertension”—increase your heart disease risk.

Lower blood pressure by following a heart healthy eating plan, including limiting your intake of salt and other forms of sodium, getting regular physical activity, maintaining a healthy weight, and, if you drink alcoholic beverages, doing so in moderation (not more than one drink a day). If you have high blood pressure, you also may need to take medication.

One good eating plan, shown to lower elevated blood pressure, is called the DASH eating plan—for a copy of the plan, contact the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) Health Information Center, which is listed in “To Learn More.”



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National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute



Women &  
Heart Disease

**High Blood Cholesterol.** If there is too much cholesterol and fat in your blood it builds up in the walls of vessels that supply blood to the heart and can lead to blockages. A “lipoprotein profile” tests your levels of total, LDL (“bad”), and HDL (“good”) cholesterol, and triglycerides, a fatty substance in the blood.

Lower cholesterol by following a heart healthy eating plan, being physically active, maintaining a healthy weight, and, if needed, taking medication.

**Overweight/Obesity.** Nearly two of every three Latinas are overweight or obese, increasing the risk not only of heart disease but also a host of other conditions, including stroke, gallbladder disease, arthritis, and some cancers. If you’re overweight or obese, even a small weight loss will help to lower your heart disease risk. At the very least, try not to gain more weight.

Lasting weight loss needs a change of lifestyle—adopt a healthy, lower-calorie eating plan and be physically active. Aim to lose no more than 1/2 to 2 pounds per week. If you have a lot to lose, ask your doctor, a registered dietitian, or a qualified nutritionist for help.

**Physical Inactivity.** Nearly 60 percent of Latinas are physically inactive—they do no spare-time physical activity. Regular physical activity lowers your risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, overweight and obesity, and diabetes.

Try to do at least 30 minutes of a moderate-intensity activity such as brisk walking on most, and preferably, all days of the week. If you need to, divide the period into shorter ones of at least 10 minutes each.

**Diabetes.** About 11 million Americans have been diagnosed with diabetes—and another 5.7 million don’t know they have it. Diabetes is on the increase for all Americans and some Latino groups have especially high rates. About two-thirds of those with diabetes die of a heart or blood vessel disease.

The type of diabetes that adults most commonly develop is “type 2.” Diabetes can be detected with a blood sugar test. If you have diabetes, it’s vital that you keep it under control. Modest changes in diet and level of physical activity can often prevent or delay the development of diabetes.



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“I have some risk factors for heart disease: high cholesterol, age, and family history of heart disease. I’ve had a lot of friends who have had heart attacks and this has made me aware that I need to take care of myself. You can’t wait until [a heart attack] happens, by then it’s too late. I try to live a healthy lifestyle by eating healthy foods and finding creative ways to exercise—like dancing.”

## QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR DOCTOR

1. What is my risk for heart disease?
2. What is my blood pressure? What does it mean for me, and what do I need to do about it?
3. What are my cholesterol numbers? (These include total cholesterol, LDL, HDL, and triglycerides, a type of fat found in the blood and food.) What do they mean for me, and what do I need to do about them?
4. What are my “body mass index” (BMI) and waist measurement? Do they mean that I need to lose weight for my health?
5. What is my blood sugar level, and does it mean I’m at risk for diabetes? If so, what do I need to do about it?
6. What other screening tests for heart disease do I need?
7. What can you do to help me quit smoking?
8. How much physical activity do I need to help protect my heart?
9. What’s a heart healthy eating plan for me?
10. How can I tell if I may be having a heart attack? If I think I’m having one, what should I do?

## TAKING ACTION

Now that you know *The Heart Truth*, what should you do? First, find out your heart disease “risk profile.” See the box above for questions to ask your doctor. Then begin taking the steps to heart health—don’t smoke, follow a heart-healthy eating plan, be physically active, and maintain a healthy weight. Start today to keep your heart strong.

## TO LEARN MORE

### NHLBI Health Information Center

Phone: 301-592-8573  
TTY: 240-629-3255  
[www.hearttruth.org](http://www.hearttruth.org)

### American Heart Association

Phone: 1-888-MY HEART  
[www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)

### WomenHeart: the National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease

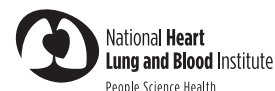
Phone: 202-728-7199  
[www.womenheart.org](http://www.womenheart.org)

### Office on Women’s Health

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
National Women’s Health Information Center  
Phone: 1-800-994-WOMAN  
TDD: 1-888-220-5446  
[www.womenshealth.gov](http://www.womenshealth.gov)



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