

Cholesterol and Heart Health: What's gender got to do with it?

Did you know that nearly one in every two American women have high or borderline high cholesterol? In fact, many people may not realize that having high cholesterol levels is more common in women than in men. No matter your gender, it's important to make sure you control your cholesterol to help reduce your risk of developing heart disease.

Why do women have high cholesterol?

Although women are more likely to have had a cholesterol screening in the past five years, they are also more likely to report not using cholesterol-lowering medication and/or to stop taking their prescribed medication. Thus, gender may play an important role in heart health. Recent studies have found that, among high-risk patients with heart disease or diabetes, women are:

- Less likely to receive information from their doctor about their increased risk.
- Prescribed statins (a cholesterol-lowering medication) less often and typically prescribed lower doses and lower-intensity statins than men.
- Less likely to fill their statin prescription.
- More likely to report missing a dose, to not take the medication as prescribed and/or to stop taking their medication all together.

For all of these reasons, it's important that women advocate for themselves and have a conversation with their health care provider about their risk for heart disease.

"Many studies show that women and their doctors underestimate their cardiovascular risk," said Retu Saxena, a cardiologist at Minneapolis Heart Institute® and a research physician at Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation®. "Have your doctor check your cholesterol levels, but more importantly have them calculate your cardiovascular risk (or evaluate your plaque burden). If your risk is high, make changes to decrease your risk including high-benefit statin use."



How can you lower your cholesterol?

A healthy lifestyle is important for everyone, and making even small changes can help you lower your cholesterol as well as your risk for heart disease. Aim to:

- Eat heart-healthy (more fruits, vegetables, fiber and healthy fats)
- Be physically active (30 minutes on most, if not all, days)
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Avoid all tobacco
- Get your numbers checked – blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol

What about medications?

In addition to making healthy lifestyle changes, your health care provider may also recommend you take a cholesterol-lowering medication to help manage your risks. Statins are the most commonly prescribed cholesterol-lowering medications, and they work by blocking the body's natural cholesterol-making process. Among women at high risk, taking a statin as prescribed can greatly lower the risk of heart disease and heart disease-related death.

Although differences exist in how they are prescribed and the side effects they cause, statins are shown to be equally effective in preventing heart disease in both men and women. But there is still work to be done in closing the gender gap, as there are still fewer women than men in clinical trials. If you have the opportunity to participate in a clinical research trial, consider doing so to increase the knowledge around treatment outcomes specific to women.



[Watch Dr. Michael Miedema, MHIF researcher and preventive cardiologist, discuss the new 2018 Cholesterol Guidelines](https://tinyurl.com/MHIFcholesterol)

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