



NEWS

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Heart Health Facts from the Montgomery County Health Department
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Norristown, PA (February 13, 2015) – February is American Heart Month and it is an opportune time to talk about heart disease. According to the American Heart Association (AHA), heart disease is a simple term used to describe several problems related to plaque buildup in the walls of the arteries. As the plaque builds up, the arteries narrow, making it more difficult for blood to flow and creating a risk for heart attack or stroke. In 2011, heart disease was the second most common cause of death for Montgomery County residents after cancer. According to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about 600,000 people die of heart disease in the United States every year—that's 1 in every 4 deaths. Coronary artery disease (CAD) is the most common type of heart disease and is the leading cause of death in the United States in both men and women.

Coronary artery disease develops as fats, cholesterol, and other substances build up in the walls of the arteries over time to form a plaque. As this continues to happen, the arteries will become narrow and some of the plaque may break off, forming a blood clot that blocks the flow of blood to the heart. This can lead to a heart attack. Because coronary artery disease often develops over decades, it can go unnoticed until a person has a heart attack.

Symptoms

Symptoms may be very noticeable, but sometimes a person can have the disease and not have any symptoms, especially in the early stages. Chest pain or discomfort (angina) is the most common symptom. This pain is felt when the heart is not getting enough blood or oxygen. How bad the pain is varies from person to person. The pain may be felt under the breast bone, but also in the neck, arms, stomach, or upper back. Other symptoms may include shortness of breath and fatigue with activity.

Risk Factors of Heart Attack

Having high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, smoking, increased age, physical inactivity, unhealthy diet, and having had a previous heart attack or family history of stroke, obesity, or diabetes can increase a person's chances of having a heart attack. Approximately 49% of adults in America have at least one major risk factor for heart disease and stroke.

Prevention

To help prevent heart disease, people should consider living a healthy lifestyle. Exercise regularly, as physical activity can help maintain a healthy weight and lower cholesterol and blood pressure (all risk factors for heart disease). Eat healthy meals and snacks such as fresh fruits and vegetables, foods low in saturated fat and cholesterol and high in fiber. Limit salt or sodium intake to help lower blood pressure. Quit smoking. Cigarette smoking greatly increases the risk for heart disease. Also avoid drinking too much alcohol as it can raise high blood pressure.

Preventing or treating medical conditions can also help lower the risk of heart disease. Have cholesterol checked by a health care provider at least once every five years. Monitor blood pressure. High blood pressure has no symptoms, so be sure to have it checked on a regular basis. People with diabetes should closely monitor their blood sugar levels. Those taking medication to treat high cholesterol, high blood pressure, or diabetes, should follow their doctor's instructions carefully and remember to take medication.

Treatment

For people with CAD, there are several steps to take to lower the risk for having a heart attack or worsening heart disease. A doctor may recommend lifestyle changes, eating a healthier diet, exercising, and not smoking. Medications may also be necessary. The medicines can treat CAD risk factors such as high cholesterol, high blood pressure, an irregular heartbeat, and low blood flow. In some cases, however, more advanced treatments and surgical procedures may be used to help restore blood flow to the heart.

When to see a doctor

If you suspect you're having a heart attack, dial 911 immediately. If you have risk factors for coronary artery disease, (high blood pressure, high cholesterol, tobacco use, diabetes, or obesity) talk to your doctor. He or she may want to test you for the condition, especially if you have signs or symptoms of narrowed arteries. Early diagnosis and treatment may stop progression of coronary artery disease and help prevent a heart attack.