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10 Heart Disease Myths You Shouldn't Believe

The facts about genetics, cholesterol, fats, surgery, stenting and more

Each year, heart disease kills more people in the United States than all types of cancer combined. Most of these deaths result from heart attack in people with coronary artery disease. As more and more people adopt a heart-healthy lifestyle and take medications to lower their heart attack risk, deaths from coronary artery disease are dropping.

Yet myths about heart disease and its prevention persist. Here are 10 common misconceptions.

Myth 1 *You'll only get heart disease if it runs in your family.* Genetics sometimes play a role in developing coronary artery disease. However, 90 percent of heart disease results from harmful lifestyle choices, including poor diet, smoking and little or no exercise.

These harmful choices can raise the level of cholesterol and other harmful fats in your blood, increase your blood pressure and cause you to develop metabolic syndrome or type 2 diabetes—all of which raise the risk of heart disease.

If you are genetically predisposed to high cholesterol, high blood pressure or diabetes, it is very important you follow a heart-healthy lifestyle and take medications to control these dangerous risk factors, and avoid or delay a heart attack.

Myth 2 *Having enough good cholesterol can offset bad cholesterol.* We used to think a large amount of good cholesterol would offset the impact of high bad cholesterol levels, but recent studies have shown this is not the case. So instead of looking at total cholesterol, which includes both your "good" high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol and "bad" low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, physicians now focus on LDL cholesterol.

Although a high HDL level is certainly good, it means your body may still be depositing cholesterol in your arteries, which can lead to heart attack, stroke and other problems, he explains.

Myth 3 *You can lower a very high LDL cholesterol level through diet alone.* If your LDL level is very high, you will need a statin or other cholesterol-lowering drug to bring it down. That's because your liver makes about 75 percent of the cholesterol in your body, and diet is only responsible for 25 percent. A heart-healthy diet may lower your LDL somewhat, but the addition of cholesterol-lowering medication will be important if you have very high LDL and a history of coronary artery disease.

Myth 4 *If your blood pressure is high, you'll be able to feel it.* High blood pressure (hypertension) is called "the silent killer" for a reason. Hypertension generally produces no symptoms until it causes a heart attack or stroke. You'll only discover your blood pressure by using a blood pressure cuff. It's a good idea to have a blood pressure reading taken before age 21 — or earlier, if high blood pressure runs in your family. This provides a baseline for measurements taken throughout life.

Myth 5 *Fats are bad for your heart.* Four different kinds of fats are found in our foods, and not all of them are bad. Artificially made trans fats, also called partially hydrogenated oils, are the worst. Trans fats, found in many baked goods and processed foods, raise bad LDL cholesterol levels. So do saturated fats, which come from animal products like red meat and butter. Replacing unhealthy saturated fats with healthy monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated fats may actually lower your LDL levels.

Myth 6 *Some "super foods" will prevent heart disease.* No food will prevent heart disease, although certain diets can. Foods like blueberries, pomegranates, walnuts and fish — while beneficial for heart health — won't prevent you from developing heart disease. However, the Mediterranean Diet, which features whole grains, legumes, fish, vegetables, fruit and monounsaturated fats like olive oil, has been shown to lower the risk of heart disease.

Myth 7 *Two to three hours of vigorous exercise per week will ensure heart health.* To lower your risk of death from coronary artery disease and cancer, you'll need five or six sessions of moderate to vigorous activity per week. You don't have to be a diehard exerciser or even a weekend warrior to benefit from increased activity. But you do have to get off the sofa and move. Your heart will benefit from any activity you do, and the more you do, the more you will benefit. Take the stairs instead of the elevator, walk around a shopping mall, vacuum your house or rake the leaves. Aim for 30 minutes of activity a day—divided into 10- to 15-minute segments—and your heart will thank you.

Myth 8 *Bypass surgery and stenting will fix coronary artery disease.* When coronary artery disease blocks the heart's arteries, surgeons can use other arteries to bypass trouble spots (called coronary artery bypass surgery) and restore circulation. Similarly, cardiologists can use stents to prop open blocked arteries. While bypass surgery and stenting can help prevent a first or second heart attack and make you feel better, they won't cure your coronary artery disease. The disease process that caused the blockages goes on.

Myth 9 *Stenting is safer than bypass surgery.* There's no doubt that coronary artery bypass grafting is major surgery. But when it's scheduled to prevent a heart attack and performed by an experienced surgeon, the operative risk is less than 1 percent. Stenting, which is less invasive than bypass surgery and allows patients to recover faster, is just as safe. Some people are likely to do better with bypass surgery or with stenting. In these cases, your cardiologist or cardiac surgeon will explain why.

Myth 10 *Women needn't worry about heart disease.* In fact, more women die from heart disease every year than from breast cancer. Men tend to develop coronary artery disease and have heart attacks at younger ages than women. But after menopause, the risk for heart attack levels out and is the same for women and men. The good news is that the chance that a woman will survive heart attack has increased by 56 percent due to earlier recognition and management of heart disease. One reason women aren't always diagnosed with heart disease is that many use their Ob/Gyn for primary care and never get a heart examination. Women should have a complete head-to-toe checkup with baseline heart exams in early adulthood. This allows for risk factors to be identified and discussed before they impact the heart.

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Outdoor Weekend for Women Scheduled for March 31-April 2 in Wilkes County

The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission will host the 20th annual Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW) Weekend Workshop, March 31-April 2, at the YMCA Camp Harrison at Herring Ridge in Wilkes County. The workshop is open to women 18 and older on a first-come, first-serve basis to the first 100 registrants.

Pre-registration is required and the registration fee is \$225, which covers two nights cabin lodging at the camp, seven meals, a t-shirt, and all equipment needed for each course, as well as workshop and classroom instruction.

Participants can choose from more than 30 outdoor-related courses, such as Game and Outdoor Cooking, Basic Shotgun, Ropes Course and Climbing Wall, Decoy Carving, Canoeing and Kayaking, Basic Fishing, Wildlife Digital Photography, Native Pollinators, Wilderness Survival Skills and more. Download a complete list of courses, including times and descriptions at www.ncwildlife.org.

Because courses are outdoors and hands-on, participants should bring tennis shoes and/or hiking boots, insect repellent, sunscreen, rain gear, water bottle, flashlight and sunglasses.

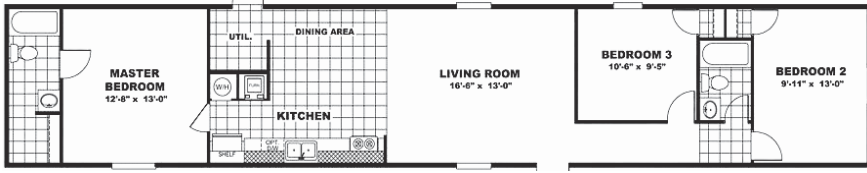
The Commission is providing financial assistance of up to 80 percent of the cost of the workshop to eligible participants through its Mel Porter Scholarship Fund, which is supported by contributions from previous BOW participants. Preference is given to first-time workshop participants who are full-time students, single parents of young children, and members of low-income households. The deadline for scholarship applications is March 15.

"Our Becoming an Outdoors-Woman weekend workshops have been extremely popular and tend to fill up very quickly," said BB Gillen, the outdoors skills coordinator with the Commission. "This workshop is tailored to women of all skill levels, from beginners who would like to improve their skills to those who have a lot of outdoor experience but would like to learn new skills."

For more information on the Becoming an Outdoors-Woman weekend workshop, contact Gillen at 919-218-3638 or bb.gillen@ncwildlife.org.

Becoming an Outdoors-Woman is an international program for women, 18 and older, to learn outdoor skills through hands-on experiences, such as archery, fishing, paddling, wildlife photography, outdoor cooking, target shooting and motorboat safety. The Commission offers several BOW-related workshops throughout the year and across the state. Learn more by visiting the Commission's Becoming an Outdoors-Woman webpage at www.ncwildlife.org.

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