

What is cardiovascular disease?

The heart is the body's **strongest** muscle and it is **well equipped to keep itself healthy** despite the multiple stresses of our everyday lives. Not only that, **we have access to what is needed** to maintain this organ, notably, **physical exercise** and a **healthy diet**.

But, there is a group of diseases that affect the heart, the most common of which are stroke and heart attack (myocardial infarction). These conditions mostly occur because the blood is not circulating smoothly and regularly, which can happen when the heart is too weak or the arteries are blocked. Blocked arteries are usually associated with the development of atherosclerosis, a condition in which plaque accumulates on the inner walls of the arteries. Partial blockage of the heart arteries causes angina. A major obstruction of the artery causes a heart attack.

Stroke occurs when the blood flow to the brain is interrupted, so that part of the brain is no longer being irrigated, causing lesions that may be irreversible and even fatal. A ruptured blood vessel, resulting in a hemorrhage in a section of the brain, can also cause a stroke.

Rare seen a century ago, by the late 1940s, cardiovascular disease had become the main cause of death in North America. Today, although they are affected 10 years later in life, more women than men suffer from these diseases.

Illnesses of our industrial civilization

The meteoric rise in cardiovascular disease parallels that of another chronic disease—cancer—and everything points to a close connection between these illnesses and social and environmental factors. The intense industrialization of the 20th century irrevocably changed the air we breathe, the food we eat, and the lifestyles we lead. Environmental pollution, industrial food (with its processed and sugar and fat-filled products), chronic stress, sedentary lifestyles, and smoking, together foster silent inflammation.* This form of inflammation remains in the body for years until it generates a serious disease.

Please note! Although lifestyle plays a crucial role in the silent inflammation process, it's important to realize that adopting healthy habits is not simply a matter of individual choice. It has been proven that socioeconomic status affects these habits, for example, by facilitating or impeding access to healthy food, education, or a job that fosters physical and mental health. Low socioeconomic status is the main determinant of health and illness; it is associated with a higher incidence of cardiovascular diseases and a higher mortality rate from heart attacks.

It's normal that as we age, we become more susceptible to cardiovascular disease. There is no relationship, however, between these diseases and menopause. In this respect, studies have shown that hormone treatment does not protect us from these diseases, and can actually increase the risk. So consider your decision about this treatment carefully.

(see *Le traitement hormonal*, available online at <http://tqasf.qc.ca/files/traitementhormonal.pdf>)

*Inflammation is actually one of the body's normal defence mechanisms, but when it is silent and invisible (we don't notice it, so we don't do anything about it) it can undermine our health. Inflammation has a harmful effect on arteries and can cause heart attacks and stroke.



Nine major risk factors for cardiovascular disease

Cholesterol, hypertension, diabetes

Although there has been a major push to market **cholesterol-free** products, cholesterol actually plays a secondary role in cardiovascular diseases. The most important thing to keep in mind is that trans fats in industrial food, and, on a lesser scale, saturated fats (animal products), are harmful to cardiovascular health.

Hypertension is also caused in large part by industrial food and our environment. Here, the culprits are salt, excessive amounts of which are added to prepared dishes in restaurants and grocery stores, and sugar, huge quantities of which are found in soft drinks, among other things.

Nearly 90% of type 2 **diabetes**, which occurs in adults, is attributable to excess body weight. Here too, refined sugar, contained in countless processed foods, is to blame. Pollution also contributes to the increased incidence of diabetes. Type 2 diabetes has grown exponentially and is closely linked to cardiovascular disease.

Sedentary lifestyle, obesity, smoking

We know that **inactivity** is a major cause of excess weight and **obesity**, which are linked to type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. In women, the impact of **smoking** on the heart has been clearly demonstrated: two-thirds of early heart attacks occur in women who are smokers.

Note: You can be overweight and still be in good physical condition. Moreover, full-bodied women are not necessarily more susceptible to cardiovascular disease; abdominal fat is the chief risk factor.

Environment, diet, urbanism

Atmospheric pollutants have a negative impact on arteries, leading, in particular, to heart failure, heart attack, and stroke. The **food** we have access to and **land-use management** (which may or may not facilitate the practice of physical exercise), also have an impact on cardiac health.

Move into action

- **Take stock.** When you reach menopause, assess your overall health and discuss it with your doctor at your next check-up. If you suffer from hypertension, you need treatment—but don't forget to make a few lifestyle adjustments, because this can also lower your blood pressure.

- **Exercise daily.** "Physical exercise is the most powerful form of prevention and it is an effective treatment for heart disease."** Taking a walk every day, or working in the garden instead of watching TV can make a big difference!

- **Stop smoking.** The risk of heart disease will be reduced by 50% in a year, and will disappear in 15 years.

- **Eat well-balanced meals and limit alcohol consumption.** Choose the least toxic foods and try out the Mediterranean food diet (lots of fruit and vegetables, whole grains, beans, nuts, fish, olive oil, etc.).

- **Lose weight...** depending on your own health and personal assessment. Avoid diets if you can.

- **Reduce stress and get more sleep.** To relax, nothing beats physical exercise, recreational activities, and getting together with friends. Sleep is also essential to good heart health. Every night, take a moment to release the tension that has accumulated over the day and you'll be better prepared for sleep.

- **Get support.** If they are to last, your lifestyle changes should be made gradually, be a source of pleasure, and provide balance in your life. Tips that will increase your chances of successfully meeting your goals: ask a friend to support you, or join a walking club or a collective kitchen. You might also benefit from professional help.

- **Natural products and supplements.** Some of these products can be helpful in preventing cardiovascular diseases. Make sure you are well informed and notify your medical practitioners of what you're taking (supplement, herbal remedy, etc.).

- **Put yourself first.** In midlife, many women realize that they haven't taken much time to focus on their own needs. This is the time to put yourself first!

** REEVES, F. (2007) *Prévenir l'infarctus ou y survivre*, Montréal, Éditions MultiMondes and Éditions du CHU Sainte-Justine, p. 219.

Recognizing the symptoms and responding effectively

In the event of a stroke, **time is the most important factor**. The earlier a person gets care, the better their chances of survival and recovery.

Symptoms of angina and heart attack: feeling of discomfort during or after physical exertion, emotional stress, or exposure to intense cold or heat; pain in the throat, neck, jaws, back or arms that disappears after a few minutes; chest discomfort; tiredness and breathlessness; respiratory difficulty; nausea, vomiting; blackouts and dizziness; cold sweats; sudden pallor; unexplained anxiety

Symptoms of stroke: swelling in the face, arms, or legs, especially on one side; mental confusion, difficulty with speech or comprehension; difficulty seeing out of one eye or both eyes; difficulty walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination; intense headache for no obvious reason; fainting or blackout; paralysis of one side of the body

If you have these symptoms or see them in someone else, **dial 911**.

Do women have different symptoms? Many experts affirm that the symptoms can be harder to detect in women: discomfort rather than back pain, or even no chest pain at all; pain in the jaw, radiating pain in the arms, or directly in the back, feelings of indigestion. Furthermore, women, more than men, tend to ignore the warning signs of a heart attack or stroke. They do not take preventive measures or get treatment as soon as they should.

More and more people are taking **first-aid courses** to learn how to do cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR). Several organizations, such as the Red Cross, provide these courses across Québec.

We have the power to act, both personally and collectively, to keep our hearts healthy. Get active! For more information or suggestions: www.rqasf.qc.ca



The causes of chronic illnesses are well known, and there are things we can do to help prevent and treat them. But health depends in large part on political decisions: prevention and access to health services, campaigns against poverty and pollution, the creation of bike paths and pedestrian walkways, access to healthy and affordable food, clear labelling of products that are harmful to our health, etc. In other words, we must act for the good of society as a whole. Why not start by planting a tree?



After 20 years of clinical practice with women aged 40 to 60, and many research studies, Dr. Christiane Northrup has concluded that emotional factors contribute as much as physical factors to cardiac health. For example, women tend not to express their anger, which can make a fertile breeding ground for the development of heart problems.

Exercise, a healthy diet and breaking the smoking habit are much more effective than reducing cholesterol in protecting women against cardiovascular diseases. In the long term, statins (massively prescribed anti-cholesterol drugs) actually accentuate silent inflammation. In our opinion, they should only be taken under very specific circumstances.

Find out more

Read *Les maladies cardiovasculaires* section of our kit entitled *Notre soupe aux cailloux : Une œuvre collective pour la santé des femmes au mitan de la vie*, (in French only), available on RQASF's website: www.rqasf.qc.ca.

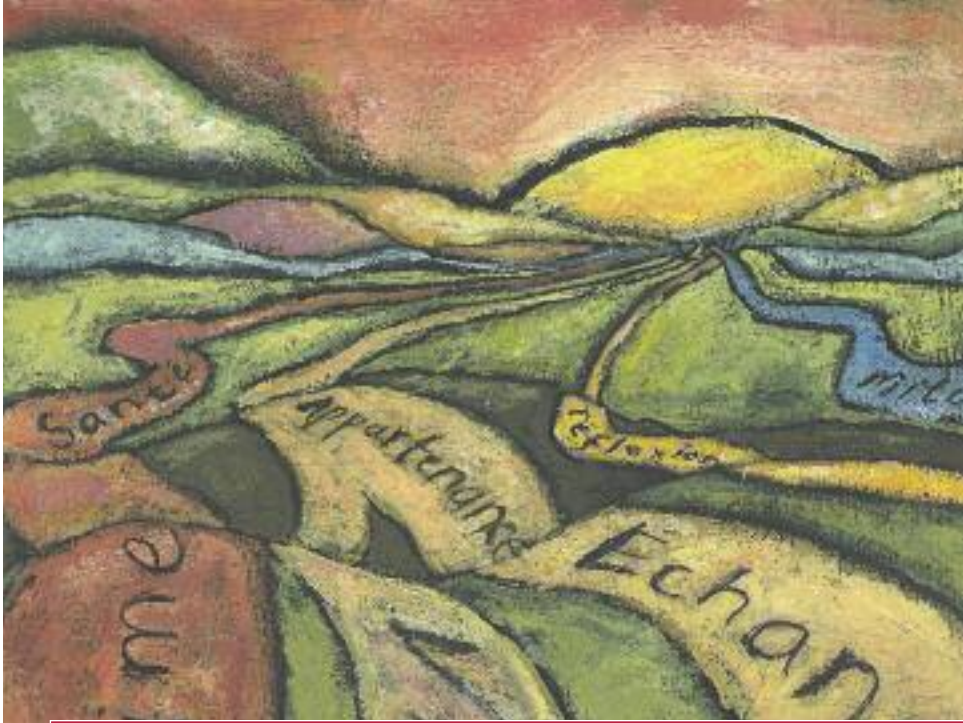
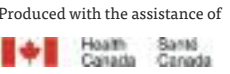
Produced by the Réseau québécois d'action pour la santé des femmes (RQASF), this kit presents a wide selection of information and tools to help women make informed choices about their health as they enter menopause.

- Additional works:
- *REEVES, F. (2011). *Planète Cœur : santé cardiaque et environnement*, Montréal, Éditions MultiMondes and Éditions du CHU Sainte-Justine, 200 p.
 - *Éducoeur-en-route : <http://www.ircm.qc.ca/CLINIQUE/educoeur/>
 - *Fondation des maladies du cœur du Québec : <http://www.fmcoeur.qc.ca/>



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Cardiovascular Disease

Women's Health at Midlife

Does cardiovascular disease mainly affect men? No, not at all. It is the **main cause of death** for women—ahead of cancer—while for men, the opposite is true. Unfortunately, **women tend to ignore the symptoms** and often wait too long before getting treatment.

Here are some things we can do, individually and as a society, to **keep our hearts healthy** and **respond promptly** to danger signals. Women have the **power** to take informed action when it comes to their health. It's never too late to **act!**