



Women & Heart Disease

Are you among the majority of women who think of heart disease as a “man’s disease?” Fayetteville radio personality Omega Jones would like you to think again.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, one in four women dies of heart disease, making it the #1 killer of women in the United States.

African American women are particularly at risk for developing the disease, in part due to genetics and in part because high blood pressure, obesity and diabetes – all risk factors for heart disease – are prevalent among African American women.

Omega, the voice of Cape Fear Valley Health’s Take Charge Of Your Health program, has a family history of heart disease. She was still surprised, however, when Shirley Elbinias-Tan, M.D., a family physician at Hope Mills Family Care, told her there may be a problem with her heart.

“I kept having heartburn,” she says. “I was eating antacids like they were Skittles®. I could taste the rawness in my throat.”

It wasn’t until she started feeling discomfort in her chest that she grew concerned and made an appointment with Dr. Tan. Dr. Tan scheduled her for an electrocardiogram, or EKG – a test that checks for problems with the electrical activity of your heart. The results came back abnormal and Omega was told to visit a cardiologist. She chose Sylvester Ejeh, M.D., of Cumberland Cardiology.

Dr. Ejeh performed a stress test to measure the heart’s ability to respond to external stress induced by exercise. Omega’s results came back abnormal and a cardiac catheterization was scheduled. The catheterization involved Dr. Ejeh inserting a long, narrow tube called a catheter into Omega’s blood vessel and guiding it through to the coronary arteries. Then contrast material was injected so that blockages would show on x-ray. The catheterization showed multiple blockages.

To repair these blockages, Omega had an angioplasty with coronary stents, or tubes, placed into her arteries to keep them open and to reduce pain in her chest. While stents can help improve blockages, they are not a cure for heart disease. To prevent new blockages from occurring, Omega is on a regimen of medications to thin her blood and she takes a daily aspirin to promote heart health. Dr. Ejeh referred her to Cape Fear Valley Health’s Cardiac Rehabilitation program, to learn new ways to exercise, cook and eat.

Today Omega says she is, “being blessed and feeling fabulous.” She feels she owes much of this to early detection.

“Listen to your body,” she says. “It will tell you when something isn’t right.”

As an African American woman, you cannot change your genetics to lessen your chances of getting heart disease. There are many changes you can make, however, that will significantly lessen your risk. The American Heart Association says that women can lower their heart disease risk by 82 percent simply by leading a healthier lifestyle.

If you smoke, quit. About one in five African American women smoke. But one year after quitting smoking, your risk for heart disease will drop by half.

Consider a heart-healthy eating plan. Following a healthy diet, limiting salt, fat and triglycerides will lower your blood pressure and cholesterol and lessen your risk of heart disease. Your physician can make recommendations for a heart-healthy diet.

Lastly, begin an exercise routine. Nearly 80 percent of African American women are overweight or obese, which greatly increases their risk for heart disease. Even a small weight loss can lower your risk. Try to incorporate 30 minutes of exercise into your daily routine. It does not need to be all at the same time; you can break up your activity into three 10-minute periods, but some form of physical activity is important to heart and general health.

Omega advises, “Always put your health first. If you’re not 100 percent, how can you care for anyone else?”

Warning Signs

Be aware that the symptoms for women having a heart attack are often different from those of a man, but any of the following symptoms can occur in men and women:

Classic Symptoms:

- Squeezing chest pain or pressure
- Shortness of breath
- Sweating
- Tightness in chest
- Pain spreading to shoulders, neck or arm
- Feeling of heartburn or indigestion with or without nausea and vomiting
- Sudden dizziness or brief loss of consciousness

Symptoms More Likely in Women:

- Indigestion or gas-like pain
- Dizziness, nausea or vomiting
- Unexplained weakness, fatigue
- Discomfort/pain between shoulder blades
- Recurring chest discomfort
- Sense of impending doom



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