As moms, we spend every waking minute taking care of our families and overseeing their health. But what about our own health?

“We’re all busy, but we need to take care of ourselves so we can take care of our families,” says Dr. Amy Cantor, who specializes in women’s health at Oregon Health & Science University.

A good place to begin is by maintaining a healthy heart.

Heart disease is the number one killer of women, causing one in three deaths every year, according to the American Heart Association. That’s approximately one woman every minute!

So what can women do to keep their hearts healthy? The answer is surprisingly simple.

“We know what we should do, but it’s putting it into practice and following through that’s the hard part,” says Dr. Sandra Lewis, a cardiologist at Northwest Cardiovascular Institute. “It’s important to remember you are modeling healthy habits for the whole family. By adopting a healthy lifestyle for yourself, you in turn are giving them the most priceless gift ever, the gift of good health.”

These six simple steps can keep your heart healthy for years to come:

1. Eat smart

Doctors agree, there’s no single “perfect” diet plan. The ideal plan is the one that works for you, your family and your lifestyle.

“You have to make sure it includes foods you like so you can stick with it for a lifetime,” says Cantor, citing a wide range of options from the DASH diet to Weight Watchers to the South Beach diet and others. The only caveat is to make sure your diet follows generally accepted health guidelines. These include incorporating plenty of fish, fresh produce and healthy fats such as oils and nuts, and avoiding processed foods.

That’s precisely the premise of the “Mediterranean diet,” recently lauded in a large-scale study published on the New England Journal of Medicine’s website for its ability to prevent heart attack, stroke and death in people with significant risk factors.

Dr. David Maslen, a specialist in cardiac care at Northwest Primary Care, was especially intrigued by the study’s methodology. While he agrees the food commonly found in the Mediterranean diet is healthful, he wonders if there were other factors at play as well.

“One group was given this tough message: ‘Cut out fat!’,” he says. “The other was told to explore this cool diet full of wonderful, fresh foods, experiment with recipes, talk with the group about what you are eating. I think the diet worked so well because they were having fun. They were talking about what they were eating, exchanging recipes, feeling involved in this healthy lifestyle and part of a community.”

Therein could lie the secret to a healthy diet: Use general guidelines for nutrition but incorporate them into a routine that’s appealing to you.

As Cantor notes, “Here in Portland we are fortunate to be close to so many great options for fresh food, from plentiful farmers markets to great grocery stores.” Why not take advantage of the region’s bounty to create your own healthful diet?

One common question centers on the “benefits” of alcohol. While many doctors agree an occasional alcoholic drink is fine, most would not suggest someone who never drinks alcohol begin drinking for health reasons.

“A small amount of alcohol can be protective, but it’s a fine line before it becomes harmful,” says Cantor.

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Dr. Sandra Lewis, Northwest Cardiovascular Institute

The Mediterranean diet, rich in fresh produce, seafood and healthy fats, has been linked to maintaining a healthy heart.

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“It’s dangerous to try to identify something to consume that will be the ‘magic pill,’” Maslen adds. “I urge women to think about what they are eating and drinking in the context of an entire healthy lifestyle.”

Heart Smarts for Busy Moms continues on page 14
2. Stay active

A nutritious diet and adequate exercise go hand in hand as key contributors to a healthy heart.

The American College of Sports Medicine recommends the following guidelines:

• Adults should get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise per week.

• Exercise recommendations can be met through 30 to 60 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise five days per week or 20 to 60 minutes of vigorous-intensity exercise three days per week.

• One continuous session or multiple shorter sessions (at least 10 minutes) both are acceptable to accumulate the desired amount of daily exercise.

This means you don’t have to dedicate a full hour-long sweat session to reap the benefits of exercise. Instead, you can combine several stints of incremental exercise, such as a 10-minute brisk walk three times a day, taking the stairs instead of the elevator, mowing the lawn with a push mower, and other activities that fit into your daily routine.

Many experts recommend accumulating at least 10,000 “steps” per day, equal to about five miles. Use a simple pedometer to check your steps. Then, as the day goes on, you can tell if you need to step it up with an extra walk after dinner, a few laps around the office or whatever it takes to meet your daily quota.

Again Cantor emphasizes the vast array of choices available and the importance of finding something you enjoy and can fit into your schedule.

Join a gym with good childcare and convenient hours, or find a stroller-size class near your home. Meet your moms’ group or work colleagues for a walk. Look into a “couch-to-5K” program. Try some exercise DVDs at home. Engage in a vigorous game of tag with your kids or challenge them to an obstacle course on the playground equipment.

The only “wrong” option is doing nothing!

3. Stop smoking

We all know smoking is a major contributor to heart disease, cancer and a multitude of other ailments. We also know it’s not unhealthy only for the smoker – second-hand smoke is a proven health risk to those around you, especially children.

Still, it’s hard to quit.

As with diet and exercise, you have a bevy of options available when it comes to smoking cessation. Talk to your doctor about these options – which include drugs, patches, gum, support groups and more – to find one that will work for you.

It’s also important to note that risks are associated with all types of smoking, not just heavy “pack a day” habits. Even occasional social smoking is a hazard to your health.

“The patients I’ve had that lived to be over 100 had a lot of things going for them,” says Maslen, “but to a one, they did not drink or smoke.”

Learn More

Get more information on heart disease and how to protect yourself against it from the American Heart Association (AHA):

General Information: goredforwomen.org

Healthful Eating (in partnership with the American Diabetes Association and the American Cancer Society): everydaychoices.org/eat.html

Staying Active: startwalkingnow.org

Hands Only CPR: heart.org (search “Hands Only CPR”)
Symptoms of a Heart Attack

Sweating, Pressure, Nausea, Jaw pain. Believe it or not, these are all symptoms of a heart attack in women. They are also symptoms that women often brush off as the flu, stress or simply feeling under the weather — which could put their lives in jeopardy.

“I really couldn’t believe this happened to me,” says survivor Amy Heinl. “I thought of myself as a healthy person, and was exercising when [my heart attack] happened.”

Whether it’s disbelief, lack of awareness or misdiagnosis, dismissing the symptoms of a heart attack can delay critical, life-saving actions. Being able to recognize the warning signs and act quickly, however, can save a life.

Symptoms of a heart attack:
- Uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain in the center of your chest that lasts more than a few minutes, or goes away and comes back.
- Pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach.
- Shortness of breath, with or without chest discomfort.
- Other signs such as breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea or lightheadedness.

As with men, the most common heart attack symptom in women is chest pain or discomfort. But it’s important to note that women are more likely to experience the other common symptoms, particularly shortness of breath, nausea/vomiting and back or jaw pain.

What to do during a heart attack

If you experience any of these signs or symptoms:
- Do not wait to call for help. Dial 9-1-1, make sure to follow the operator’s instructions and get to a hospital right away.
- Do not drive yourself or have someone drive you to the hospital unless you have no other choice.
- Try to stay as calm as possible and take deep, slow breaths while you wait for the emergency responders.

Why it’s important to know the symptoms of a heart attack

Women who consider themselves healthy often misdiagnose the symptoms of a heart attack because they don’t think it could happen to them. That is why it’s crucial to learn about heart disease and stroke, know your numbers, live a heart-healthy lifestyle and be aware of the risk factors of heart disease.

Reprinted with permission from the American Heart Association’s Go Red for Women Campaign, goredforwomen.org

4. Know your risk factors

Maslen advises patients — jokingly — “Choose your parents wisely.”

Of course, you can’t change your heredity, but sharing your family history with your physician can help your doctor identify genetic factors that might put you at greater risk for heart disease.

It’s also important to know the risk factors that can weigh into heart health. These include blood pressure, cholesterol, blood sugar, weight, body mass index (BMI), pregnancy issues that might continue postpartum (gestational diabetes, elevated blood pressure, etc.), and even depression, which can make it hard to maintain healthy habits.

“Every woman should know her numbers and her risk,” says Lewis. “Make sure you get rechecked at regular interviews so you can deal with any issues proactively.”

5. Know the warning signs of heart disease

Numerous warning signs can point to potential heart disease, the most obvious being chest pain, shortness of breath, pain or numbness in the arms or legs, or an unusual heartbeat (racing, slow or even fluttering). But women often suffer from atypical angina, Maslen says, and that can be harder to diagnose.

He describes the symptoms of atypical angina as just generally not feeling well. It often presents as fatigue, abdominal pain or nausea. Typically, the symptoms get worse with exercise and better with rest. They’re almost never fleeting but last at least a few minutes.

He acknowledges these symptoms are vague and could be caused by a host of conditions, from anemia to hypothyroidism to depression to just being an overworked mom! That’s why they’re often overlooked rather than considered potential warning signs of heart disease.
If you experience these types of symptoms, err on the side of caution and discuss them with your health care provider. He or she can help you determine if you need to be examined for potential heart problems before a heart attack occurs.

Whether or not you experience symptoms of heart disease, be sure to schedule regular checkups with your health care provider to keep track of your risk factors and address any potential issues before they become severe.

(Learn about the warning signs of a heart attack in “Symptoms of a Heart Attack” on page 16.)

6. Pass it on

Updated “hands-only” CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) guidelines, which focus on compressions rather than mouth-to-mouth, make it easier to learn and utilize the life-saving skill.

“Every family should learn CPR. Teach your kids and then have them teach others. Why not hold a session with your child’s class?”

Dr. Sandra Lewis, Northwest Cardiovascular Institute

Families should exercise together. Start when your kids are in a stroller and model those healthy habits. Take hikes, take ski vacations, go on family walks after dinner.”

It’s never too early – or too late – to begin living a heart healthy life.

Cathie Ericson is a mom to three busy boys. She exercises regularly, eats well and occasionally indulges in that one glass of heart-healthy wine.