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CARDIOVASCULAR HEALTH ON THE FARM

We all have to work at it.

Whether you call it hypertension or high blood pressure, this health condition is often called the “silent killer.” That’s because, frequently, people are unaware that they have high blood pressure until it causes a severe health problem, such as heart disease, a heart attack, or a stroke.

Michelle K. Seekford, DNP, FNP-C, MPH, COHN-S, CCM, is a Family Nurse Practitioner, Occupational Health Nurse Specialist, and Certified Case Manager with a Master’s in Public Health and a Doctor of Nursing in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Seekford notes that cardiovascular (CV) disease in women may look different than in men. Still, there are three main preventive measures both men and women can take to reduce their risk of developing CV.

“Coronary heart disease, primarily caused by high cholesterol levels, is the leading cause of morbidity and mortality in the United States, killing just over 385,000 men in 2021,” Seekford says. “Everyone has heard of a myocardial infarction or heart attack. That’s chest pain, upper back or neck discomfort with pain, indigestion, heartburn, nausea or vomiting, extreme fatigue, upper body discomfort, and dizziness or shortness of breath. Heart failure symptoms in men look a bit different than in women.”

Over 60 million women, roughly 44% of the United States population, are living with some form of heart disease, which is the leading cause of death for women in this nation. Heart disease can affect women of any age. Studies have shown that women living in rural areas have less access to health care and have poorer health outcomes. Women in rural areas have also

been shown to be at higher risk of death from ischemic heart disease than those in urban areas. Learning to recognize high blood pressure and heart disease risk factors and practicing preventive measures to curb heart disease is vital in addressing this hidden health risk.

“Even though 31% of all American farmers are women, health and safety education for the agricultural population is most often aimed at men,” Seekford says. “Almost 52% of high blood pressure deaths are in women, and according to the American Heart Association, only 44% of women recognize cardiovascular disease as their greatest health threat.”

Seekford points out that, in America, there are approximately 4.1 million female stroke survivors, and 57.5% of stroke deaths are in women. Of concern to medical personnel like Seekford is the fact that women with heart disease may not experience the same heart attack symptoms as men, with just a dull pain in the neck, jaw, or throat, which they tend to dismiss as nothing serious.

“Some women, presenting with this pain, believed it was a toothache,” Seekford says. “But as we dig into the layers of what’s been going on with their health and how they’ve been feeling, we frequently (find more serious issues).”

Males and females are susceptible to the same heart disease risk factors, which include high LDL cholesterol levels, underlying diabetes, or pre-diabetes, smoking or second-hand smoke, and obesity. Following an unhealthy diet, minimum physical activity, and excessive alcohol use are all habits that can contribute to developing heart disease.

“These are all modifiable risk factors,” Seekford says. “Age is a factor that we can’t change, but people can change their diet, physical activity, and habits such as smoking and significantly reduce the risk of heart attack or stroke.”

Seekford recommends that women (and men) monitor their blood pressure levels and recognize the health risks that this condition can lead to.

“Recent research at California’s Cedars-Sinai Medical Center found that blood pressure starts rising earlier and more rapidly in women as we age,” she says. “When women come into my clinic, I talk to them about their family history, their current modifiable and non-modifiable risk factors, and make sure they’re aware of their blood pressure readings.”

Understanding how to monitor blood pressure trends can also help track changes. Practicing healthy habits and regularly monitoring blood pressure can help avert severe heart disease.

“It’s really easy for women to write off early symptoms of hypertension, such as fatigue, sleeping issues, bloating, headaches, blurred vision or dizziness,” Seekford says. “Often, women determine that busyness or periods of high stress are causing their symptoms. They don’t stop to connect symptoms with hypertension.”

Patients diagnosed with high blood pressure (or someone who desires to monitor blood pressure trends) may consider bringing their blood pressure monitoring device to a clinic visit, so medical personnel can compare the patient’s device readings with the clinical readings, which helps ensure the device is accurately assessing their blood pressure.

“Keep a log of your blood pressure because this can help identify trends, too,” Seekford says. “Share the log with your health care provider because it may indicate where you’re at in your health care journey. Just introducing a few hours of physical activity can benefit your heart. It also helps reduce stress and anxiety, which can increase blood pressure. Make sure you take time to manage stress and anxiety and schedule things that are both good for you and

important to you. Eat a healthy diet and manage your weight. All these practices can lead to significant improvements over a year.”

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