

## Women's top health threats: A surprising list

By MayoClinic.com

Do you know what threatens your life the most?

Below are the top causes of death for women in the United States, starting with the most common. Take this opportunity to learn about each health concern and how you can reduce your risks. What you learn may surprise you.

### **No. 1 — Heart disease**

Surprised? Many women are. It's common to think breast cancer is the No. 1 threat to women's health when, in fact, heart disease is responsible for more deaths in women than all forms of cancer combined. Heart disease is the most significant health concern for women in the United States today, responsible for nearly 489,000 deaths each year.

The common belief that heart disease affects mostly men is a dangerous myth. In reality, more women than men die of heart disease in the United States each year. But according to the American Heart Association, only 13 percent of women know that heart disease is a major threat to their health.

The good news is that heart disease is one of the most preventable health conditions. You have the power to reduce some of your risks:

- Avoid smoking and limit the amount of alcohol you drink.
- Eat a diet rich in fruits, vegetables and whole-grain products.
- Exercise regularly.
- Control other health conditions that may put a strain on your heart, such as high blood pressure, diabetes and high cholesterol.

If you're at increased risk of heart disease, your doctor also may suggest a daily low dose of aspirin.

### **No. 2 — Cancer**

It's easy to believe cancer is a major threat to women's health, but the kinds of cancer women are dying of might surprise you. According to the American Cancer Society (ACS), the most common cause of cancer death in U.S. women is lung cancer. It's estimated that more than 73,000 women in the United States will die of lung cancer in 2005, with 90 percent of these deaths linked to cigarette smoking.

Breast cancer is the second-leading cause of cancer death in U.S. women, and it's estimated that more than 211,000 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in 2005. The ACS estimates that about 40,000 women die each year of breast cancer.

The third-leading cause of cancer death for women in the United States is colorectal cancer. Like heart disease, colorectal cancer is often mistakenly thought of as a man's disease, but as many women die of colorectal cancer each year. Estimates suggest that it claims the lives of approximately 28,000 women in the United States annually.

At least one-third of all cancer deaths are related to nutrition and other controllable lifestyle factors. Do all you can to reduce your cancer risks:

- Don't smoke or chew tobacco.
- Exercise regularly.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Avoid excessive sun exposure.
- Limit the amount of alcohol you drink.
- Have regular preventive health screenings.
- Know your family medical history and review it with your doctor.

### **No. 3 — Stroke**

Nearly 163,000 people in the United States die of stroke each year, and almost two-thirds of them are women. Stroke not only is women's No. 3 killer, but it also is one of the leading causes of disability in America.

Smoking and uncontrolled high blood pressure are important risk factors for stroke. Although stroke is highly preventable, certain risk factors such as family history, age, sex and race cannot be controlled. Even if you're at increased risk of stroke, you can still take steps to prevent it:

- Don't smoke.
- Control your blood pressure.
- Lower your cholesterol.
- Limit saturated fats.
- Exercise regularly.

### **No. 4 — Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)**

COPD is an overall term for a group of chronic lung conditions, including bronchitis and emphysema. The main cause of COPD is smoking, and it's strongly associated with lung cancer, the No. 1 cause of cancer death in women.

About 64,000 women in the United States die of COPD each year. The quality of life for a person with COPD diminishes as the disease progresses. Shortness of breath and activity limitations develop, and you may eventually require an oxygen tank or even mechanical respiratory assistance to breathe.

How do you reduce your risk of dying of COPD? This one's easy: Don't smoke, and avoid secondhand smoke.

### **No. 5 — Alzheimer's disease**

Alzheimer's disease — which affects an estimated 4.5 million Americans — is a progressive, degenerative brain disease that goes beyond simple forgetfulness. What may start as slight memory loss and confusion can eventually lead to irreversible mental impairment.

More women than men have Alzheimer's. In fact, nearly 42,000 women die of Alzheimer's disease each year — more than twice the number of men. One reason women may be more affected is that women generally live longer, and the risk of Alzheimer's increases with age.

Current treatments focus on stabilizing the signs and symptoms, improving well-being and easing caregiver burden.

### **No. 6 — Diabetes**

Diabetes, a group of diseases that affect the way your body uses blood sugar (glucose), is a serious health condition that affects about 18 million Americans. In 2002, it claimed the lives of more than 73,000 people in the United States, and over half of them were women.

It's estimated that 5 million Americans don't know they have diabetes. Many people become aware of it only when they develop one of its life-threatening complications. Advanced diabetes can cause blindness, kidney failure and severe nerve damage. People with diabetes are also two to four times more likely to die of heart disease and suffer from stroke.

The most common type of diabetes is type 2 diabetes. This type of diabetes, generally developing after age 40, can often be prevented. Follow these steps to reduce your risk:

- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Exercise regularly.
- Get your fasting blood sugar level checked periodically.

## **No. 7 — Accidents**

Each year, more than 37,000 women die from accidents (unintentional injuries). Although the statistics on accidental death are unclear, these top health threats for women may surprise you:

- **Motor vehicle accidents.** Traffic-related accidents were responsible for more than a third of all accidental deaths for women in 2002. You can reduce your chances of a fatal crash by routinely using your seat belt, keeping your speed within limits and not driving while sleepy or under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- **Falls.** One out of every three people over age 75 falls each year, and about 7,800 women in the United States die from such falls. Three-fourths of all falls occur in the home, so making some common-sense changes can help prevent falls and their potentially debilitating consequences. Getting regular eye exams, exercising regularly and improving your balance also can help reduce your risk.

## **No. 8 — Pneumonia and influenza**

Pneumonia and influenza combined are the eighth-leading cause of death for women in the United States today. Together they took the lives of more than 36,000 women in 2002.

When associated with other chronic health conditions, pneumonia and influenza can be life-threatening. People with COPD, asthma, heart disease, diabetes and conditions that suppress the immune system are at high risk. Because both pneumonia and influenza affect the lungs, smoking increases the danger of these two diseases.

The risk of both pneumonia and influenza can be reduced by immunizations. A yearly flu shot can be up to 90 percent effective in preventing influenza in healthy adults. The pneumococcal vaccine can reduce the risk of getting pneumonia by more than half. Stay healthy — get those shots.

## **Putting health risks into perspective**

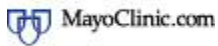
Putting these health risks into perspective is just as important as understanding what the top health threats are. This ranking of health risks applies to the entire population of women in the United States — no matter what your age. But for specific age groups, the leading cause of death can shift. For instance, it's true that during the course of your entire lifetime, heart

disease is your No. 1 health threat. However, in your 20s, your risk of dying from an accident is your top health threat. Likewise, from ages 35 to 64, your greatest risk is cancer.

It's also important whenever you read about health risks to think about the numbers you read in real terms. For example, that nearly half a million women died of heart disease in 2002 seems staggering. That's a lot of women. But if you think of it in terms of the total number of women in the United States that year — more than 146 million — the number represents just a small fraction of the female population as a whole.

The bottom line? Be concerned about health risks, but don't panic. Do whatever you can to lead a healthy lifestyle — including eating healthy foods, staying physically active, getting regular checkups and paying attention to your environment. Such measures can reduce your risk factors for these conditions and help you lead a long and healthy life.

content by:



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