



## The heart of the matter

The common belief is heart disease only affects older men, but that couldn't be further from the truth. "Any woman who is reaching the perimenopausal age has a risk factor," Mehta said.

**Raise awareness by donning red for National Wear Red Day on Friday, Feb 2. Go Red For Women is the American Heart Association's national movement to end heart disease and stroke in women. The movement encourages women to band together and collectively wipe out heart disease and stroke. It challenges them to know their risk for heart disease and take action to reduce their personal risk. It also gives them the tools they need to lead a heart-healthy life.**

He said health screenings can identify certain factors that contribute to heart disease. "In general, when someone starts reaching their early 40s, that's the time one should get checked," Mehta said. "If you have a risk factor—family history or other known indicator—certainly that age bar drops below into the 30s."

Mehta said women who want

to check their heart health can begin at their family doctor, who will probably request tests that include a fasting glucose, cholesterol and lipid panel. If the tests come back normal, they will want to get retested about every five years.

Mehta said heart disease presents differently in women than in men and women often miss the clues.

"Women are playing a lot of different roles in this day and age," he said. "They are in the workplace and home and with children—they are providers for everybody. They forget to take care of themselves."

He said it's imperative that women take time to focus on their own health. "You are only going to be able to take care of others if you are well," he said. "Not neglecting your own health is very important."

Having a healthy heart is simple, Mehta said. "Understand the risk factors. Make healthy choices in your daily routine. Practice regular cardio/physical activity. Maintain an ideal body weight. And stay away from smoking and alcohol. "All those things are very important," Mehta said. "The earlier you detect it, the better the outcome."

# Could Your Heart Be Broken? When chest pains aren't caused by anxiety

By Andrea Rose

Each year, one out of three women will die from heart disease—that's about one woman every minute, making heart disease the No. 1 killer in women. The statistics should make you see red. But are you concerned enough to do something about it?

The good news is 80 percent of cardiac events can be prevented with education and lifestyle changes.

"We can save lives just by creating awareness," said Viral Mehta, a cardiologist with Comprehensive Cardiovascular in Bakersfield and a clinical assistant professor at UCLA School of Medicine. "It is very preventable."

## Is it anxiety or something more serious?

Many women experience chest pains or a feeling of a racing heart now and then, typically when under stress. To know the difference between anxiety symptoms and heart issues, you have

to look first for simple clues: Is your heart racing and do you feel clammy, sweaty or unwell while under duress or just while watching TV or sitting on the beach? Has it happened once or twice or consistently?

"Heart-disease related symptoms are not necessarily brought up by a particular trigger," Mehta said. "They will keep happening. They will not go away. If these things are persistent, absent of any obvious situation or triggers, that would be more suspicious."

Mehta said after you pay attention to when you feel chest discomfort, it may be time for a check-up with your physician.

"You cannot tell just by symptoms," he said of heart disease. But he suggests knowing your risk factors. "Smoking or tobacco use is a big one," he said. Family history of heart disease is another risk factor. High blood pressure and high lipids/cholesterol are other risk factors.

# Heart and mind

## Emotional health affects our hearts

By Dr. Viral Mehta, MD, FACC, FSCAI

Every year, approximately 1.5 million Americans experience a heart attack—some of them had no clue something was wrong with their heart. While common cardiac risk factors, such as diabetes, high blood pressure and smoking, do contribute to the problem of heart disease, they are not the sole culprits. Research has shown that in some patients, poor emotional health is associated with heart disease, and it runs a more aggressive and recurring course in these patients. Individuals who frequently experience hostility, cynicism, anger and depression are particularly susceptible to poor cardiovascular health. Individuals who feel emotionally and socially isolated also perceive the world to be a very hostile place, contributing to their chronic stress.

Type A personalities can also be at an increased risk of heart disease. Type A behavior is often fiercely competitive, overly self-critical, easily wound up and more prone to hostility and anger. Not surprisingly, Type A's experience chronic stress that makes them more vulnerable to cardiovascular problems. Recent research has also suggested that individuals who exhibit Type D personality traits are also more prone to developing coronary heart disease. They not only tend to experience negative emotions, but they suppress their emotions and avoid social contact with others.

### How do emotions affect heart health?

There are two major ways emotions can affect heart health: biologically and behaviorally. When people get emotionally overwhelmed, they tend to indulge in unhealthy behaviors like overeating, smoking and drinking. Obviously, if emotional issues remain unresolved and become chronic, unhealthy lifestyle becomes the norm with all the adverse health consequences.

The biological effects of poor emotional health are even more damaging. Chronic stress leads to increased levels of various stress hormones including cortisol, epinephrine, insulin and several others known to cause serious damage to the heart. Other consequences

include vascular inflammation, damaged endothelium (lining of blood vessels), increased blood pressure, and tendency to form blood clots triggering heart attacks and strokes. Individuals with chronic stress also have lower levels of "good" cholesterol (HDL) and tend to develop more blockages in their arteries.

### What steps can I take to improve emotional and, thereby, heart health?

The first crucial step to improving emotional health is simply recognizing our poor emotions and changing the way we respond to them. The source of stress is not our environment, rather it is how we perceive and respond to these "stressful" situations. While we cannot always change the people and the world around us, we can certainly change how we see and react to our world. According to Dr. Dean Ornish, guru of preventive cardiology and a champion of the "Opening Your Heart" program, anything that leads to real intimacy and connection with other human beings has healing effects on the heart. A number of scientific studies have also shown that activities such as support groups, yoga, meditation or

any faith-based prayer activity have long-lasting benefits for the heart. Thus, making conscious efforts to



Dr. Viral Mehta

release all negative emotions and cultivating forgiveness have tremendously positive health benefits for your heart.

—Dr. Viral Mehta specializes in interventional cardiology and is clinical assistant professor of medicine at UCLA.

