Heart Health – For Valentine’s Day and Year-Round

By Janet Hackert, Regional Nutrition and Health Education Specialist

Heart health is promoted around Valentine’s Day and yet it is important year-round. A heart attack occurs when blood flow to the heart is blocked. Here are some symptoms and risk factors for heart disease and what individuals can do to improve their heart health.

The most common symptom for both men and women is the tell-tale pain in the chest. It can be described as “uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain in the center of the chest that lasts for more than a few minutes, or goes away and comes back,” according to the American Heart Association. It may feel like a ton of bricks or it may be less intense. There may also be pain in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or upper stomach, according to the National Institutes for Health. Shortness of breath is another common symptom.

Women can experience other symptoms that may not immediately be associated with heart attack. These include breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea and vomiting, feeling exceptionally tired for days without cause, and light-headedness or dizziness. If someone is experiencing symptoms of a heart attack, call 9-1-1 immediately.

Heart attacks happen to men and women, old and young, unhealthy and fit. That is why it is so important to understand the risks factors for heart disease, know one’s own risk, and make healthy choices to reduce the risk. One risk factor is heredity – heart disease runs in the family. To know your risk, talk with family members, starting with immediate family, to find out as much as possible. Even for someone who is otherwise healthy, family history increases risk. Another factor involves health status. Know your numbers for blood pressure, cholesterol, weight or body mass index and waist circumference. High numbers indicate a greater risk. If they are high, take action to reduce them. Blood glucose is another measure to monitor. People with diabetes are four times more likely to also have heart disease. Managing diabetes can help lower that risk. Other risk factors include smoking, drinking alcohol more than moderately (that is, one drink per day for women, two for men), being physically inactive and living a stressful lifestyle.

Be aware of the risk factors, take steps to reduce them when possible, and know the symptoms if a heart attack does occur. Make healthy choices and live with a healthier heart.

For more information on heart health, visit the American Heart Association’s web site at www.heart.org or the National Institutes of Health at http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/heartattack/signs. You can also contact me, Janet Hackert, at 660-425-6434 or HackertJ@missouri.edu or your local University of Missouri Extension office.

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