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Sue Ann Says: Listen to Your Heart

To relax, I focus on deep breathing and listen to the rhythmic beats of my heart. And, sometimes I marvel at the fact that at my age, it continues to beat at all! So, when was the last time you listened to your heart? After all, it's working 24 hours a day, seven days a week without any breaks – totaling about 38 million beats a year!

Symptoms of a heart problem can be a bit vague, especially for women. What would you do if you felt short of breath, weak, shoulder pain or a sudden extreme feeling of fatigue? Would you call 911 or instead lie down on the couch thinking you're under too much stress? In women, these are signs you could be having a heart attack.

Make sure you take cues from your body seriously. "Patients, especially women, need to realize something isn't right," says Dr. Vijay Kantamneni, a cardiothoracic surgeon at St. Mary's Hospital in Madison. "By telling your doctor, he or she can be more cautious and order tests if necessary. If a woman comes to the hospital with undiagnosed symptoms that could correlate to a heart attack, I go the extra step to make sure their heart is ok. That could mean an EKG, chest x-ray or even a stress test."

High blood pressure, smoking, obesity and diabetes increase a woman's risk of developing heart disease. Women who smoke, for instance, tend to have a heart attack 19 years earlier than non-smoking women. African American women also have a 72 percent higher risk for heart disease. These same women 55-64 years old have double the risk for a heart attack as their Caucasian counterparts.

But all hope is not lost. It's been proven, for example, that a woman's heart responds better than a man's to healthy lifestyle changes.

“Women have to be active and not just during the warm months,” says Dr. Kantamneni, “In winter there is some evidence that heart attacks increase and the mortality rate for women who suffer heart attacks is higher. That’s why it’s so important that women exercise year-round.”

In addition to exercise, be sure to eat properly. Also, don’t smoke and keep control of high blood pressure and diabetes.

In the end it comes down to committing to a healthy attitude and lifestyle. Women tend to think it’s the men in their lives they need to worry about most for heart issues. While keeping tabs on the guys is important, don’t forget to take care of yourself, too! Listen carefully. Your heart might be trying to tell you something.

Because it all begins with a healthy woman...

Sue Ann Thompson is founder and president of the Wisconsin Women’s Health Foundation (WWHF), a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts forums that focus on education, prevention, and early detection; connects individuals to health resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. To learn more, visit wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.

((Side Bar)) What Is High Blood Pressure?

High blood pressure is a serious condition that can lead to coronary heart disease (also called coronary artery disease), heart failure, stroke, kidney failure, and other health problems. "Blood pressure" is the force of blood pushing against the walls of the arteries as the heart pumps blood. If this pressure rises and stays high over time, it can damage the body in many ways.

Know Your Numbers

Category	Systolic (top number)		Diastolic (bottom number)
Normal	Less than 120	And	Less than 80
Prehypertension	120–139	Or	80–89
High blood pressure			
Stage 1	140–159	Or	90–99
Stage 2	160 or higher	Or	100 or higher

These ranges apply to most adults (aged 18 and older) who don't have short-term serious illnesses.