


Have a Heart!

Understanding and Preventing the #1 **KILLER** of Women

by Susan Spencer



Thirty-year-old Essence Harris was the picture of the health. The busy single mother from New Orleans worked part-time work as a fitness trainer, weighed a trim 125 pounds and didn't have high blood pressure or high cholesterol.

But she started feeling short of breath when exercising. One day, she couldn't carry her son up the stairs without her heart beating rapidly and feeling lightheaded.

"Initially I thought maybe I was too tired or doing too much," she said. "But then I knew something just wasn't right."

Essence's doctor told her she was having panic attacks and wanted to prescribe antidepressants. After demanding to see a cardiologist, who performed a stress echocardiogram,

she discovered that two of her coronary arteries were 90-percent blocked. She immediately had surgery to repair the blood vessels.

Essence's symptoms—shortness of breath, rapid heartbeat and lightheadedness—are typical of heart disease symptoms among women in their 30s, 40s and 50s (along with nausea, sweating and fatigue), but different from the classic crushing chest pain or numbness along the left jaw or arm that older people, especially men, report.

Essence was lucky. Because she was in such good shape to begin with, her heart muscle wasn't damaged. And with careful attention to diet and lifestyle, she's healthy six years later.

She was also unusual.

Most women with heart disease have one or more risk factors. Major risk factors include being overweight, having high blood pressure, high cholesterol, smoking, not exercising, and having diabetes and a family history

of heart disease.

"Eighty percent of all heart disease can be prevented," said Dr. Jennifer Mieres, a New York cardiologist. Dr. Mieres is a member of the scientific advisory council for WomenHeart, an advocacy organization for women with heart disease. She is also a spokesperson for the American Heart Association's Go Red for Women initiative.

Dr. Shawn Howell, an interventional cardiologist at George Washington University Hospital in Washington, D.C., said, "African-American women are 30 percent more likely to die of heart attack and 78 percent more likely to die of a stroke than White women."

That's largely because Black women are more likely to have high blood pressure (45.8 percent of Blacks versus 31.1 percent of Whites), to be overweight or obese (79.6 percent of Blacks versus 57.5 percent of Whites), and to have diabetes (13 percent of Blacks versus 6.4 percent of Whites), according to the American

Heart Association.

These factors contribute to the build-up of cholesterol, or fatty plaques, on artery walls, or they weaken the linings of blood vessels. When arteries are totally blocked or ruptured, it causes a heart attack or stroke.

Dr. Howell said that while some of the racial discrepancy reflects less access to health care: "From a cultural standpoint, we have done it to ourselves," he said. "African-American women do not exercise. We don't want to mess up our hair or don't have time for it. Also, it has been embedded in us that being 'thick' is more attractive to men. But there's a difference between being 'thick' and being overweight."


The American Heart Association recommends 30 minutes of exercise, like brisk walking, on most days.

Dr. Jeanine Turner, a cardiologist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago, focuses on preventing heart attack or stroke with a mind, body and soul approach. First, know your blood pressure, weight, cholesterol and glucose levels. "I tell my

patients to know their numbers like they know their dress size," Dr. Turner said. Next, control your risks by committing to a healthier lifestyle with low-fat and low-sodium foods, exercise and stress reduction.

Food preparation is a big part of a heart-healthy diet. "Bake or broil instead of frying," said Constance Brown-Riggs, a registered dietician, diabetes educator, and American Dietetic Association spokesperson. For every 100 calories in a food item, there should be no more than 3 grams of total fat or 1 gram of saturated fat. Skip the butter and use olive oil or canola oil instead.

Constance recommends adding beans, including black-eyed peas and kidney beans, to add fiber and protein. Avoid processed food, which has a lot of sodium, and watch out for hidden fats, like in fried fish sandwiches or from whole milk in smoothies.

"It's never too early to start with heart-healthy living," said Dr. Turner said. "It's part of taking charge and being a partner in your own health care." 

Put down the high-fat foods and give this heart-healthy dish a try!

Caribbean Chili and Sweet Potatoes

Servings: 4

Recipe by Constance Brown-Riggs from *The African American Guide to Living Well with Diabetes* (The Career Press Inc., 2010)

1 medium sweet potato
1 15-ounce can low-sodium black beans
2 minced jalapeno peppers
2 diced tomatoes
Salt to taste

Preheat oven to 350 F. Bake sweet potato.

Meanwhile, combine black beans, jalapeño chilies and diced tomatoes.

Cook over low heat for 30 minutes.

Cut the sweet potato into four pieces. Cover each quarter with

a 1/2 cup of the black bean mixture and serve.

Nutrition info per serving:

Calories 130
Total fat 0.5 g
Saturated fat 0 g
Cholesterol 0 mg
Sodium 440 mg
Carbohydrate 25 g
Fiber 7 g
Protein 7 g



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