



By Alice Robeson, MPH

## February is American Heart Month

Do you have a sweetie? February 14<sup>th</sup> is coming up fast. It's a time to let the people you love know how much they mean to you. We often do that through candy, flowers, and sentimental heart-shaped cards that are fun to give and to get.

February is also a time to think about the real "heart of the matter". Your heart may just be one of many muscles in your body, but its rhythmic beating keeps you alive. It is so very easy to take your heart for granted. Unless something goes wrong with it, you hardly know it is there. Unfortunately, there are many things that can and do go wrong with it. Some can cost you your life. In fact, heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States for both men and women.

"Heart attacks" are a common kind of heart disease. They occur when the heart muscle doesn't get enough oxygen. When a heart attack happens, part of the heart muscle can die if blood flow to the heart is not quickly restored.

Heart attacks may occur suddenly, but in most cases, the symptoms develop more slowly. Many people explain them away as heart burn or other less fatal conditions. The symptoms of heart attack include:

- Pain or discomfort in the chest that lasts for more than a few minutes
- Pain or discomfort in other body parts such as the neck and shoulders, one or both arms, the back, the stomach or the jaw
- Shortness of breath
- Excessive sweating
- Nausea
- Lightheadedness

Because there are so many symptoms and almost no one gets all of them, heart attacks can sometimes be hard to recognize. Chest pressure or pain are the most common symptoms, and are easier to associate with the heart than a backache. Yet the elderly, women, and people with diabetes may not get chest pain at all. Women sometimes report significant anxiety and a sense of foreboding with few or none of the more common symptoms. Some people may have a heart attack and have no symptoms. This is called a "silent" heart attack.

So what should you do if you think you are having a heart attack? Call 9-1-1 and go to the emergency room immediately! Time is of the essence in treating heart attacks – delay can literally be deadly. Even if your symptoms turn out to be caused by something else, it is better to be safe than sorry!

There are effective treatment options used in the treatment of heart attacks. Medicines can be given to open up the heart's blocked blood vessels, but they work best when they are given in the first hours following the attack. Doctors may also be able to place a tube called a stent in the blocked blood vessel to restore normal blood flow. When several of the heart's vessels are blocked, surgery called coronary bypass is performed. The blocked blood vessels are replaced with vessels taken from other parts of the body.

Heredity is one factor associated with heart disease. While you can't change your genes, you can improve your overall heart health by living a healthy lifestyle. Regular exercise, a diet that is low in saturated fats and salt can definitely improve your heart health. Your doctor can also recommend medications that will reduce your risks of having a heart attack. Blood pressure control is extremely important for heart health. Taking aspirin or similar drugs that keeps blood from clotting too easily may also be prescribed.

The bottom line: your heart is precious. Take good care of it and it will take good care of you for many years to come.

Remember always...  
**Prevention is Power!**