

Heart Disease in African-American Women

by the Go Red For Women Editors (American Heart Association, 2014)



Splashing a little bit of water on her face didn't calm [Shermane Winters-Wofford's](#) first date jitters. And then what she perceived as nervousness escalated into sweating and tightness in her chest.

Although she didn't experience the typical warning signs, Shermane was having a stroke.

A stroke? How could it be? After all, she thought of herself as perfectly healthy. But it turns out Shermane had been at risk all along. Like many other African-American women, she had a strong family history of [high blood pressure](#) and heart disease. Unfortunately, she didn't discover this until it was almost too late.

Heart disease is the No. 1 killer in women, and stroke disproportionately affects African-Americans. Importantly, African-American women are less likely than Caucasian women to be aware that heart disease is the leading cause of death.

Diabetes, smoking, high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, physical inactivity, obesity and a family history of heart disease are all greatly prevalent among African-Americans and are major risk factors for heart disease and stroke. What's more, African-American women have almost two times the risk of stroke than Caucasians, and more likely to die at an earlier age when compared to women of other ethnicities.

Here are a few unsettling stats:

- Cardiovascular diseases kill nearly 50,000 African-American women annually.
- Of African-American women ages 20 and older, 49 percent have heart diseases.
- Only 1 in 5 African-American women believes she is personally at risk.
- Only 52 percent of African-American women are aware of the signs and symptoms of a heart attack.
- Only 36 percent of African-American women know that heart disease is their greatest health risk.

The truth about high blood pressure

More than 40 percent of non-Hispanic blacks have high blood pressure, which is more severe in blacks than whites, and develops earlier in life. This little known fact is something that, if known and treated in advance, could have led to a more romantic first date for Shermane.

But why is it targeting African-Americans?

Researchers have found that there may be a gene that makes African-Americans much more sensitive to the effects of salt, which in turn increases the risk for developing high blood pressure. In people who have this gene, as little as one extra gram (half a teaspoon) of salt could raise blood pressure by as much as five millimeters of mercury (mm Hg).

The African-American population also tends to have higher rates of obesity and [diabetes](#), which puts them at greater risk for high blood pressure and heart disease. But for many African-American women, particularly those who consider themselves perfectly healthy, perception may not always equal reality.

So what's the solution?

For starters, [cutback on the amount of salt in your diet](#). In fact, make a serious effort to improve your overall eating habits by learning about heart-healthy foods, and [how to prepare them](#). And of course, if you're not already active, [get moving](#).

Shermane made these changes following her first stroke, but didn't commit to them until several years later when she suffered a second stroke. This goes to show that the risks for stroke cannot be ignored – something Shermane now realizes.

What are the stroke warning signs?

- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination
- Sudden, severe headache with no known cause

Heart Disease in Hispanic Women

by the Go Red For Women Editors (American Heart Association, 2014)



“I thought it couldn’t be true,” says [Eva Gomez](#). “In my mind, I take care of other people. There’s no way that I will be the one who has to be cared for.”

Sound familiar?

Like many other Hispanic women, Eva spent her time as a [caregiver](#) for her family rather than thinking about herself. The result? Thirteen years of an ignored her heart murmur.

Many Hispanic women have said that they more likely to take preventative action for their families when it comes to heart health. However, they end up completely ignoring their own health in the process, and these acts of selflessness can become deadly.

Here are some stats:

- On average, Hispanic women are likely to develop heart disease 10 years earlier than non-Hispanics.
- Only 1 in 3 Hispanic women are aware that heart disease is their No. 1 killer.

Why Hispanic women?

While heart disease doesn’t discriminate, you could argue that it does have a bit of a penchant for racial bias where Hispanic and Latina women are concerned. And the statistics above are proof.

Why? “Hispanic women think [heart disease] is something that is ‘my’ problem and they don’t want to share it with their family,” explains [Myrna Aguilar](#). “It makes it more difficult for them to get the help they need.”

Myrna, unlike most Hispanic women, was proactive about her health. Heart disease shared a long history with her family. But as she grew older, she became determined to stop the disease that claimed the lives of too many family members for so long. “I decided no more,” she said.

Myrna knew firsthand the challenges that face Hispanic women: they take on the role of caregiver superwoman, catering to the needs of everyone but themselves. And that catering largely has to do with food.

For Hispanic and Latina women, cooking for family is an act of love that can involve unhealthy pork products and lard. And the more they assimilate to American traditions, the quality of their diets really deteriorate.

Turn the corner to a heart healthy life

To address these issues, the American Heart Association launched [Go Red Por Tu Corazón](#), which promotes a heart healthy lifestyle among Hispanic women, building on the strong ties to family and cultural traditions.

As a Hispanic woman, remember that your commitment to your family cannot be met unless you make a commitment to yourself first. A commitment that [Maricela Wilson](#) didn’t make until after she was diagnosed with heart disease.

“You take care of your home, you take care of your children, you take care of your husband,” says Maricela. “You take care of everybody else but yourself. You come in last.”

Today, Eva, Myrna, [Migdalia](#) and Maricela are more committed to their families than ever before. And they’re fiercely committed to putting their own health issues first.

“I Go Red for myself, my family and all Hispanic women,” Maricela proudly declares.

Just like these ladies, you can reverse this trend in your own family – and in your own life. Being born Hispanic does not have to be synonymous with heart disease, or death. But in order to do that, you have to share the passion and love you have for your family with yourself.