

Chapter 1

Confronting Heart Disease: The No. 1 Health Threat

In This Chapter

- ▶ Reviewing the good and bad news about heart disease in the United States
- ▶ Looking at specific concerns for women, African Americans, parents, and older adults
- ▶ Finding out that you can improve your heart health
- ▶ Assessing your risk of a first heart attack

Why is the heart so magical for us? Why do we tell our loved ones that they live inside our hearts? Why do we say that someone with enormous courage has “tremendous heart”? Why are lovers said to die of a broken heart? Everyone has an emotional attachment to this miraculous pump that is inconceivable for any other organ. Would you ever think about your lungs or kidneys or pancreas in this way? Of course not. Humans seem to have a built-in sense of the heart’s importance. And cardiovascular disease in all its forms is the biggest threat to our hearts.

Exploring How Heart Disease Affects Your Life

The heart captivates our imagination for good reason — human health, daily performance, and life itself depend on the heart. The heart and the cardiovascular system have amazing sophistication, strength, and durability. At the same time, the health of the heart rests in a fragile balance. When even small parts of its complex machinery are a little bit out of whack, the heart can cause great discomfort, pain, and even death.

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Despite the emotional energy we attach to our hearts and the heart's crucial importance to life itself, most people are pretty ignorant about the heart and how it works. You know you can't live without one. You know that heart disease is pretty common and more than a little scary. So when your doctor says your cholesterol levels or elevated blood pressure is raising your risk of heart disease, it's a little alarming. And the bottom falls out of your stomach if your physician says, "I don't think that chest pain is a muscle strain. We'd better do some tests to rule out heart disease." At moments like that you wish you knew more about that small pump thumping away in your chest and all the things that threaten it and what you can do about them. That's where *Heart Disease For Dummies* comes in.

Facing the bad news about heart disease

Heart disease is public health enemy number one in America. In one or another of its manifestations, heart disease touches virtually every family in the United States. Consider these startling facts:

- ✓ Almost 60 million Americans — almost one in every four — have one or more types of heart disease.
- ✓ Heart disease and stroke cause more than one of every two deaths — more deaths than all other diseases combined.
- ✓ An individual is more than 10 times more likely to die of heart disease than in an accident and more than 30 times as likely to die of heart disease than of AIDS.
- ✓ Heart disease is an equal-opportunity killer. It is the leading cause of death in men and women and all ethnic and racial groups in the United States.
- ✓ If money is the most important thing in your life, you might like to know that the yearly estimated cost of cardiovascular disease in the United States is \$286.5 *billion*.

As a cardiologist, I've seen these statistics made all too real in the lives of too many patients. But I've also seen what people can do to take charge of heart health at all stages, from working to lower their risk of developing heart disease to learning how to control and live well with advanced coronary artery disease (CAD) and its varied manifestations.

Seizing the good news about preventing and controlling heart disease

The bad-news facts about heart disease are real, but they aren't the only news. Extensive research proves that you can do many things in your daily life and in working with your physician to use the latest medical science that can preserve and maximize the health of your heart — even if you already have heart disease. Consider these good-news facts:

- ✓ People who are physically active on a regular basis cut their risk of heart disease in half.
- ✓ People who stop smoking cigarettes can return their risk of heart disease and stroke to almost normal levels within five years after stopping.
- ✓ Overweight people who lose as little as 5 percent to 10 percent of their body weight can substantially lower their risk of heart disease.
- ✓ Simple changes in what you eat can lower blood cholesterol.
- ✓ The number of deaths from heart disease declined 20 percent during the last decade — a decline largely based on lifestyle changes.

Working with your physician to control heart disease

Even if you have CAD or have had a heart attack, clinical research shows that working with your physician in a supervised program to reduce your risk factors for heart disease is highly beneficial and even life saving. Take a look at what research reveals about how you can improve your health:

- ✓ If you have CAD, modifying risk factors such as high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, physical inactivity, and being overweight can reduce your risk of a future heart attack or the need for coronary artery bypass surgery, and add years to your life.
- ✓ In clinical studies, people who experienced a heart attack or unstable angina and who lowered their total cholesterol by 18 percent and LDL cholesterol by 25 percent experienced a 24 percent decrease in death from cardiovascular disease when compared to a control group. The need for bypass surgery was reduced by 20 percent.

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- ✓ Appropriate physical activity or exercise improves the ability to perform activities comfortably for people with angina and people who've had heart attacks or even coronary surgery.
- ✓ Weight loss can help lower cholesterol levels and control blood pressure and diabetes — conditions that contribute to the continued progress of heart disease.
- ✓ If you smoke and have had a heart attack, quitting smoking significantly reduces your risk of having a second heart attack or experiencing sudden death.

Checking Out Why You Should Care about Heart Disease

So who should care about heart disease? As the good news in the previous section proves, everyone. No matter your present state of heart health, you can do plenty to reduce your risk factors for heart disease. (Find out more about that in Chapter 3.) Young or old, man or woman, totally healthy or coping with heart disease or other health problems, regardless of ethnic and racial backgrounds, you need to care about heart disease. If you belong to certain groups, however, some associated facts and conditions should raise your consciousness about why paying attention to heart disease and heart health should be important to you.

Caring about heart disease, if you're a woman

Although heart disease is an equal-opportunity killer, many people, men and women alike, continue to think that heart disease is primarily a *man's* problem. Wrong! Consider these facts:

- ✓ More women than men die of heart disease in the United States.
- ✓ Although men suffer heart attacks an average of ten years earlier than women, after menopause women catch up. Within the year after a heart attack, 42 percent of women will die, compared to 24 percent of men.
- ✓ Women are less likely to know the warning signs for a heart attack.

- ✓ Women smokers are at six times greater risk of heart attack than non-smoking women.
- ✓ Amazingly, recent surveys show that women are more afraid of breast cancer than cardiovascular disease. Although without question breast cancer is a serious disease, only 1 woman in 27 dies from breast cancer, but 1 in 2 dies from heart disease.

In the final analysis, heart disease is at least as dangerous for women as it is for men.

So, if you're a woman who bought this book for the man in your life, think again. Keep this copy for yourself and buy another one for him! There is just as much in this book for you as there is for the men in your life.

Caring about heart disease, if you're African American

Heart disease is the leading cause of death for African Americans, just as it is for all Americans. Although every individual is different, African Americans, as a group, experience a higher incidence of certain conditions that contribute to the risk of heart disease. African Americans:

- ✓ Develop high blood pressure at earlier ages than White Americans, and at any decade of life, more have high blood pressure, which is a risk factor for heart disease and stroke
- ✓ Are 2.5 times more likely to die from stroke than European Americans
- ✓ Are twice as likely as non-Hispanic Whites to have diabetes, a factor that contributes to developing heart disease

Although heart disease is a leading cause of death for all women, Black women ages 35 to 74 have a death rate from heart disease that's nearly 72 percent higher than White women.

Although much current research seeks to determine the causes of the higher incidence of high blood pressure among African Americans, African Americans can prevent and control hypertension and other risk factors by adopting appropriate lifestyle practices.

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Caring about heart disease, if you're a parent

The incidence of heart disease is, of course, very rare among children and youths. But the roots of heart disease are firmly planted in childhood. As people in the United States have spent more and more time in front of the TV or computer screen, commuting in cars, and eating out, children in the U.S. are learning lifestyle behaviors and developing health conditions that may make them more, rather than less, likely to develop heart disease and other health problems. The good (and bad) habits of a lifetime usually begin in childhood. Parents need to set good examples for their children and encourage them to adopt practices that optimize their future health. Consider the following facts about children in the U.S.:

- ✓ An estimated 4.1 million teenagers ages 12 to 17 smoke. More than 43 percent of high school students use tobacco products, and that percentage continues to grow. Smoking is a major contributor to heart disease, cancer, and other health problems.
- ✓ Approximately 50 percent of American teenagers get no regular physical activity.
- ✓ More than one in five children and youths, ages 6 to 17, are overweight, another risk factor for heart disease.

Caring about heart disease, if you're older

Unfortunately, many Americans expect heart trouble to be part of their older years. That need not be so. And if you *are* older and, for that matter, even if you already have heart disease, you can do plenty to avoid being part of these statistics:

- ✓ Approximately 84 percent of deaths from heart disease occur in people older than 65.
- ✓ People older than 65 account for about 85 percent of deaths from heart attack.
- ✓ After age 55, the incidence of stroke doubles with each decade of life.
- ✓ The most frequent cause of hospitalization for people older than 65 is congestive heart failure.
- ✓ In America, the older you get, the fatter you get. Americans are twice as likely to be overweight — a risk for heart disease they absolutely can control — at 65 than they were at 35.

Taking Charge of Your Heart Health

Without question, heart disease is a serious enemy. In fact, it's the biggest enemy. But, it's equally true that you can take charge of your heart health, whatever its present state.

As I often like to say: *Ipsa scientia potestas est*, or knowledge is power. (That Latin should get you ready for some of the medical terms I must occasionally use. Besides, I'm a doctor, so what did you expect?) The rest of *Heart Disease For Dummies* is full of information that can empower you to

- ✓ Understand the basics about heart health and heart disease
- ✓ Partner with your physician in putting the power of simple lifestyle practices and medical technology to work for you

Assessing Your Risk of a First Heart Attack



The statistics and facts that I share earlier in this chapter may have you thinking about your own risk of heart disease. Many tests help people assess their risk of developing CAD, in general, and first heart attacks, in particular. Based on data from the Framingham Heart Study, the longest and largest population study of heart disease, the test that follows helps you assess your risk of having a first heart attack, gives you a good idea of how you can modify your risk factors, and may highlight topics for you to talk about with your physician at your next checkup. You do have a regular checkup scheduled, don't you?

First Heart Attack Risk Test

This test can help you figure out your risk of having a first heart attack. Fill in your points for each risk factor. Then total them to find out your level of risk.

- _____ **Age (in years) Men:** Younger than 35, 0 points; 35 to 39, 1 point; 40 to 48, 2 points; 49 to 53, 3 points; and 54 and older, 4 points.
- _____ **Age (in years) Women:** Younger than 42, 0 points; 42 to 44, 1 point; 45 to 54, 2 points; 55 to 73, 3 points; 74 and older, 4 points.
- _____ **Family History:** A family history of heart disease or heart attacks before age 60 — 2 points.
- _____ **Inactive Lifestyle:** I rarely exercise or do anything physically demanding — 1 point.

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- ___ **Weight:** I weigh 20 (or more) pounds more than my ideal weight — 1 point.
- ___ **Smoking:** I'm a smoker — 1 point.
- ___ **Diabetic:** Male diabetic, 1 point; female diabetic, 2 points.
- ___ **Total Cholesterol Level:** Less than 240 mg/dl, 0 points; 240 to 315 mg/dl, 1 point; more than 315 mg/dl, 2 points.
- ___ **HDL Level (good cholesterol):** 35 to 59 mg/dl, 0 points; 30 to 38 mg/dl, 1 point; less than 30 mg/dl, 2 points; more than 60 mg/dl, 1 point.
- ___ **Blood Pressure:** I don't take blood pressure medication; my blood pressure is (*use your top or higher blood pressure number*): Less than 140 mmHg, 0 points; 140 to 170 mmHg, 1 point; greater than 170 mmHg, 2 points; or, I'm currently taking blood pressure medication — 1 point.
- ___ **Total Points**

If you scored 4 points or more, you may be above the average risk of a first heart attack compared to the general adult population. The more points you score, the higher your risk. (Based on data from The Framingham Study, as adapted by Bristol Meyer Squib.)

If you scored 4 points or more and haven't had a recent checkup, scheduling one soon is a good idea. You may also want to take your risk assessment results in to discuss with your physician.

Benefiting from heart health

Taking control of your heart health offers other wonderful upsides for living well that include

- ✓ **Improving your overall health:** Many of the steps that benefit your heart health also improve your total health and fitness, to say nothing of your good looks.
- ✓ **Increasing functionality:** Use it or lose it, goes the old saying. The healthier your heart, the greater the probability that you can stay active, mobile, and engaged in pursuits that interest you for a long, long time.
- ✓ **Increasing economic benefits:** The healthier you are, the lower your health-care costs, and the more money in your pocket for fun things.

- ✓ **Increasing longevity:** Keeping your heart healthy is not an iron-clad guarantee that you'll live longer, but considering the mortality rates of people with heart disease (reviewed earlier in this chapter), even card-carrying "Dummies" can figure out that keeping your heart as healthy as possible can keep the grim reaper away longer.
- ✓ **Having more fun:** Nothing slows you down or scares the family like a heart attack. Angina pain, angioplasty, coronary artery bypass surgery, and other common outcomes of heart disease aren't picnics in the park, either. Working for heart health and controlling heart disease can help you avoid these problems.