



Women in Leadership Seminar Highlights

February 24, 2012

Topic: Show Your Heart You Care®: Guidelines for Prevention of Cardiovascular Disease in Women with Dr. Nanette Wenger



Dr. Nanette Wenger of Emory University School of Medicine joined us this February to provide a compelling, in depth examination of women's cardiovascular health.

Dr. Wenger lead her presentation with an image of Hygieia, the Greek Goddess of Women's Health, explaining that while the Greeks had a goddess to take care of women's health, we have to take responsibility for ourselves today. She then shared that Heart disease is the leading cause of death among women in the United States.

We were shocked to hear that a recent national survey from the American Heart Association revealed that only 53% of women would call 911 if they were experiencing symptoms of a heart attack. Dr. Wenger revealed that many women don't even realize they are at risk or grossly underestimate the magnitude of their risk for cardiovascular disease. Nearly half of women who have had experienced some sort of cardiovascular event didn't believe they had been at risk. Some may erroneously feel "protected from bad family history or believe it's a man's disease." This issue of awareness is more pronounced among black and Hispanic women, partly attributed to cultural and/or language barriers and lower levels of health literacy. These lower levels of awareness are paralleled by higher rates of cardiovascular deaths among black women compared to white women.

Dr. Wenger is convinced that cardiovascular disease prevention via lifestyle changes is the best bet for reducing risk and improving chances of survival. To prevent cardiovascular disease, Dr. Wenger suggests 150 minutes/week of moderate exercise accompanied by 75 minutes/week of vigorous muscle-strengthening activities. Many women cite end-of-the-day exhaustion or a lack of time as reasons why they don't exercise. Dr. Wenger responds, "You had better find time for exercise, and if you don't you had better find time for disease." Worried that it may be too late to start exercising? A Nurses Health Study of 72,488 women found that women who were sedentary but later engaged in walking, reduced the risk of heart attack and coronary death by 20-30%; walking may save your life!

Diet plays a critical role in shaping cardiovascular health as well. Dr. Wenger explained that a diet rich with whole grains, fish, fruits, and vegetables in conjunction with limited fat, alcohol, sodium, and sugar is optimal for maintaining a healthy weight and thereby reducing your risk of cardiovascular disease. Dr. Wenger introduced "The 250:250 Rule:" Exercising an extra 250 calories/day, and eating 250 fewer calories/day produces a net change of 500 fewer calories/day = 3500 calories/week, better known as 1 pound!

Maintaining a healthy blood pressure (>120/80) and cholesterol levels are essential to minimizing risk for cardiovascular disease. When diet and exercise are not enough, pharmacological interventions can be introduced.

Cardiovascular health deserves your attention. It's much better to prevent the problem than to pay the price for ignoring it with your life.