

Know your numbers



At the cardiac rehab at Greenwood Leflore Hospital's Outpatient Rehabilitation & Wellness Center are, from left, Dr. Bahati Harden, a primary care physician; patients Mary Williams and Phillip Eads; Lee Roach, a registered nurse and coordinator of the cardiac rehab; and patient Willie Whickum.

Ruthie Robison

Heart disease can begin to develop at any age

By RUTHIE ROBISON
Managing Editor

People need to be aware of their risk for heart disease, said Dr. Bahati Harden, a primary care physician.

"I think especially younger people under the age of 25 are not aware of their risk," she said.

February is American Heart Month. Heart disease is the No. 1 killer of both men and women and can happen at any age.

To prevent heart disease, the first step is to "know your numbers," said Harden. "You need to know your numbers at 20 really," because a person can begin developing heart disease before then.

Those numbers to know include blood pressure, heart rate, oxygen saturation, cholesterol, sugar, weight and BMI (body mass index).

"So if we think about heart disease, it is really a disease of lifestyle more than the other diseases that we have," said Harden.

Health conditions that may lead to heart disease include high blood pressure, unhealthy blood cholesterol levels, diabetes and obesity. There are also certain behaviors that may increase the risk of heart disease, such as an unhealthy diet, inactivity, consuming too much alcohol and tobacco use.

"About half of all Americans (47%) have at least 1 of 3 key risk factors for heart disease: high blood pressure, high cholesterol and smoking," the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported.

One of the biggest drivers for heart disease, said Harden, is hypertension.

She added, however, "That's one of the most reversible things."

Hypertension, or high blood pressure, is commonly referred as the "silent killer" because it usually has no symptoms.

It is considered a major risk factor for heart disease, according to the CDC. Blood



What parts of your self-care routine help your heart?

Self-care for your heart is really self-care for your whole self. You can improve and protect your health overall when you:

- Get a daily dose of physical activity, such as a brisk, 30-minute walk.
- Cook meals that are low in sodium and unhealthy fats.
- Take your medications as prescribed and keep your medical appointments.
- Sleep 7-8 hours a night.
- Manage stress through, for example, meditation, yoga, a warm bath, or quiet time with a good book or funny movie.
- Try to reach or stay at a healthy weight by moving more and having snacks like fruits and veggies ready to grab when hunger hits.

— National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

pressure can be lowered with lifestyle changes or with medicine, which reduces the risk for heart disease and heart attack. "But here in the Delta, there is so much

diabetes," Harden added.

Uncontrolled diabetes is a big issue in the area. The CDC reports that the risk of death from heart disease for adults with diabetes is higher than for adults who do not have diabetes.

"There's a lot of undiagnosed diabetes and that goes in with the knowing your numbers," said Harden. "We have a lot of folks who don't manage their diabetes through diet, medication and lifestyle."

While heart disease can be reversible, many people wait too long before taking the steps necessary to prevent it.

"I find that with most of my patients everybody thinks that they have time, and they don't," said Harden.

Lee Roach, a registered nurse and coordinator of the cardiac rehab at Greenwood Leflore Hospital's Outpatient Rehabilitation & Wellness Center, said she has had patients who have said that they thought they were too young to get heart disease or had more time before they needed to make heart health a priority.

"They don't realize that I'm damaging the blood vessels," she said.

Roach usually sees patients after a cardiac event has occurred.

When they start cardiac rehab, "We want to make sure they are compliant with their medications, first of all," she said.

Next, she stresses a healthy diet — eating the proper foods — and a physically active lifestyle and exercise.

"Those are the three things — diet, exercise and medication compliance," she said. "A lot of the time, if they are physically active and compliant with a heart-healthy diet, some of their medications can be adjusted. Because if they lose weight, or if they control their blood pressure better, they can lower the medicines that they are on and even take away medications that they are on."

Roach also educates her patients about heart health and the importance of diet,

exercise and controlling diseases, such as diabetes and hypertension.

"If you eat right and if you exercise, you can add years to your life and prevent complications from coronary heart disease or any other heart disease that you've been diagnosed with," she said.

A healthy lifestyle can start with small steps.

Roach recommends exercising at least 150 minutes a week, walking at a moderate-to-brisk pace, which is about 30 minutes a day for five days. She also recommends to "watch what you eat" and eating a diet that includes vegetables and lean proteins.

"Then, you are going to be OK because you can develop collateral circulation," she said. "If you've got history of blockage, your body can form its own bypass. So we really harp on the diet and exercise."

Roach said for those just starting out, even a 15-minute walk daily can be beneficial.

"We all at some point have done what we were not supposed to do exactly, but that's why knowing the true risks that are associated with heart disease" is so important, she said.

"The ones who reach us, they have had a heart attack or some kind of procedure done, so they have a new perspective on why it's so important," said Wellness Center Director John Cook. "So they are really eager to listen and get more education."

They might not have paid much attention to it in their younger years, thinking, "That's not going to affect me." But when it actually does hit home and does make an impact on their life, the ones who are coming here have a new motivating factor to say, "Hey, I need to make some changes. I need to do something different." Really, we would like to be the ones to educate them to keep them out of here."

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