

Sound Health: Affairs of the heart

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In this the first of a monthly column, Dr. Whittaker writes about steps you can take to keep your heart healthy.

Sound Health: Affairs of the heart

By Lori Whittaker, MD

I love to talk about affairs of the heart: Not just because St. Valentine's Day falls in February, but because this is American Heart Month.

Your heart can always use a little TLC. And the same goes for the heart of your husband, your wife, your significant other, your kids and even your grandkids. There are some relatively simple things all of us can do to reduce risks associated with diseases that affect your heart's ability to work.

So let's give your heart a Valentine. First, get the Healthy Heart Checklist provided by the Puget Sound Health Alliance, located under "Resources" at www.wacommunitycheckup.org Print it out. Take this important information with you when you visit your doctor so you can discuss each item on the checklist.

A lot of the conversation you'll have with your doctor will center on basic steps to take to help you:

- Eat a lower-fat diet;
- Stay active;
- Quit smoking or using tobacco;
- Get regular blood pressure checks;
- Do a heart disease risk assessment to determine your risk for heart disease;
- Take the medications your doctor prescribes, including drugs to lower your cholesterol; and,
- If you have been in the hospital for a heart attack, get a prescription for a "beta blocker" to help prevent future heart attacks.

Even small changes in your lifestyle can make a big difference in helping to prevent diseases of the heart and blood vessels. You can take control of your health.

But let's face some tough facts for a moment: Those of us who live in the Puget Sound region could be doing better by our hearts. We know this from comparisons in the Puget Sound Health Alliance's *Community Checkup* report, which looks at health care provided by clinics and hospitals in King, Snohomish, Pierce, Thurston and Kitsap counties.

You can look it up. At www.wacommunitycheckup.org, you can actually see how your local clinic or hospital measures up in working with their patients to make sure people get effective care to stay as heart healthy as possible.

This includes looking at how many were tested for cholesterol, blood pressure, whether patients got prescription of cholesterol-lowering drugs and beta-blockers.

What we've learned from the *Community Checkup* report is that all of us – you, doctors like me, nurses, clinics and hospitals, health plans, and employers – each have a role to help reduce the risk and problems associated with heart disease.

Working together as a team, we can all lower the risk from heart disease. To do your part, get a copy of the Healthy Heart checklist and take it with you the next time you see your doctor.

Talk it over, point by point then follow your doctor's advice. Starting today, begin to make small changes: when you're having dinner, make healthy food choices. Be more active. Don't put off getting your blood pressure checked. And by all means, stop smoking (and if you chew the tobacco, quit that too!). For more tips about living a healthy lifestyle check out "Resources" at www.wacommunitycheckup.org

And, this being American Heart Month, start that lifelong affair with your heart!