



Feature Column

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Keeping Your Hometown Healthy

Our Heart Is In Your Hometown

October 4 – 11, 2002

Cardiovascular disease remains the leading cause of death for men and women in Arkansas, and the United States, despite more than three decades of declining cardiovascular disease death rates. About every 29 seconds an American will suffer a coronary event, and about every minute someone will die from one (2002 Heart and Stroke Statistical Update, American Heart Association).

Cardiovascular disease is a group of diseases of the heart and blood vessels. Coronary artery disease leads to a heart attack. A stroke or brain attack is a disease of the arteries supplying the brain.

Fortunately, many of the well-documented risk factors for heart disease and stroke are preventable. Physical inactivity, poor nutrition, obesity and smoking are risk factors that can have grave consequences on an individual's health. Poor diet and lack of exercise contribute to 300,000 preventable deaths each year, second only to tobacco use.

Successful prevention of cardiovascular disease includes steps to prevent and control these modifiable risk factors at the community level. Take a look at your community. Do the policies and environment in your hometown support healthy behaviors? It does little good, for example, to encourage people to take a walk outside if their neighborhoods are unsafe or provide no sidewalks or lighting. What about healthy eating? It is difficult for Arkansans to eat fruits and vegetables if they are not readily

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available or affordable. Community policies and environments encourage healthy behaviors and promote a healthy lifestyle whenever possible.

Examples of community policy and environmental changes to support healthy behaviors are:

- ✓ Building, fixing and maintaining sidewalks
- ✓ Opening school gymnasiums after hours for community use
- ✓ Adding lighting to a walking trail
- ✓ Making healthy snacks available in vending machines
- ✓ Offering and identifying healthy meal options at local restaurants
- ✓ Establishing a community garden or a farmer's market
- ✓ Assuring availability of smoke-free restaurants and public facilities

A \$300,000 core capacity grant, received annually from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), enables the Cardiovascular Health Program at the Arkansas Department of Health to increase statewide efforts to promote cardiovascular health. Efforts address heart disease and stroke—the number one and the number three killers of men and women across all racial and ethnic groups in the United States and the leading causes of disability.

The Cardiovascular Health Program in Arkansas has examined Arkansas' burden of heart disease and stroke and developed partnerships with other governmental and private organizations and businesses. The grant program is developing strategies to be included in a state plan to promote heart health and reduce heart disease, stroke and related risk factors—tobacco use, poor nutrition, physical inactivity, high blood pressure, diabetes and high cholesterol. In particular, the program will focus on developing policies and environmental changes to reduce the barriers to healthy behaviors in our communities.

The burden of heart disease and stroke in the U.S. is overwhelming and costly. More than

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950,000 Americans die of cardiovascular disease each year, accounting for more than 40 percent of all deaths. More than half of the deaths are among women. In fact, every year, one in three American women die of heart disease. A disproportionate burden of death and disability from heart disease and stroke affects people of racial and ethnic minority groups and low-income populations. This year, the cost of heart disease to the nation, including health costs and lost productivity resulting from illness and death, is expected to be \$326.6 billion.

When the health of one part of a community suffers, everyone suffers. Instead of telling communities what they can do to be healthier, we will work closely to help them identify the unique health problems they face. However, healthier communities won't appear overnight, nor will it be possible to make the problem disappear instantly. To succeed, efforts must be consistent, comprehensive, accountable and sustainable. Arkansas must commit to do all it can to battle cardiovascular disease and its significant cost to society. This commitment must come not only from health care providers and public health professionals, but also from those in all walks of life. Nothing less will be effective.

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