

Katy heart disease
sufferers and
cardiologists
share their tips
for spotting the
symptoms and
staying heart
healthy

GO RED
for Katy Women

*Written by Jody Lane
Select Photography by Suzi Issa*

One morning while walking down the hall at Mayde Creek High School, Julia Oldham, a teacher for 25 years, found herself unable to breathe. She felt better after resting in the nurse's office, but a week later, she decided to visit her family doctor. The morning she walked into his office, her chest felt very tight, her heart was racing, she was having difficulty breathing, she was exhausted all the time, and she had gained 16 pounds over the past week. "It took him two seconds to say, 'Go to the ER,'" Oldham recalls. Tests confirmed her heart was misfiring due to an atrial fibrillation. "It was a very gradual kind of thing," Oldham shares, adding, "I didn't realize how sick I was."

Prevention Is Worth a Pound of Cure

Staying heart healthy may not always be on the average woman's to-do list. The proverbial "prevention is worth a pound of cure" mentality, though, can provide your best hedge against heart disease, according to Dr. Amit Manhas, a board-certified interventional cardiologist. "The old notion, which is fading, is that women don't have heart attacks or heart disease," he says. "And statistics are such that women have it just as much, maybe even a little more, than men. If a woman sees herself as a potential heart patient and takes preventive measures, she'll be better served."

The preventive prescription for a healthy heart involves three key steps: Stay physically active, choose healthy foods, and don't smoke. And for the women whose genetic code predisposes them to heart disease, Dr. Manhas ups the ante. "Start the measures we know are effective as early and aggressively as possible, because you're fighting your body's own natural tendency toward a disease," he advises.

The earliest warning signs of heart disease may not be accompanied by a physical symptom. Even though a patient may feel fine, a routine exam can show elevated blood pressure, abnormal blood levels, or an atypical EKG. "For women who want to tune in to their body, any kind of chest pain - squeezing, stabbing, or burning - is worrisome," says Dr. Manhas. If you start to have physical symptoms, it's important to pay attention and see a physician immediately.

Making Heart Health a Priority

Oldham has made heart health a high priority in her life. In July, she became the first Methodist West Houston Hospital patient to undergo a heart catheterization procedure called ablation. By the end of the summer, her atrial fibrillation had been corrected and her health had been restored. Now, she takes time to water walk at Mary Jo Peckham Park, consults

with an exercise therapist, and is looking into a structured weight loss program.

Her primary advice to women regarding heart health can be summed up in three words: "If" means "yes." "If you wake up and think, 'I need to go to the emergency room,' go," she advises, adding, "Listen to that still, small voice of reason that says, 'Yes, you really should take care of this.'"

Paying Attention to Symptoms

Melanie Eppinger, a new homes sales counselor in Cinco Ranch, didn't have time for heart disease when she was diagnosed with it last year at age 50. Physically active and healthy for most of her life, her only risk factor was high blood pressure. Then one night after eating out with colleagues, Eppinger felt pain in her left forearm and a little heartburn. The next morning, she woke up nauseous with excruciating pain. "I literally dropped to my knees and prayed for the pain to go away," she recalls, and it did - for a little while.

Three days later, after unrelenting come-and-go shooting pains, she finally called the doctor, who advised her to go to the emergency room; Eppinger went to work instead. That evening when she finally visited the hospital, tests confirmed she had suffered a heart attack caused by blockage. The next day she underwent surgery to put a stent in one of her larger



After finding herself unable to breathe one day, Julia Oldham visited the doctor and discovered she had suffered an atrial fibrillation

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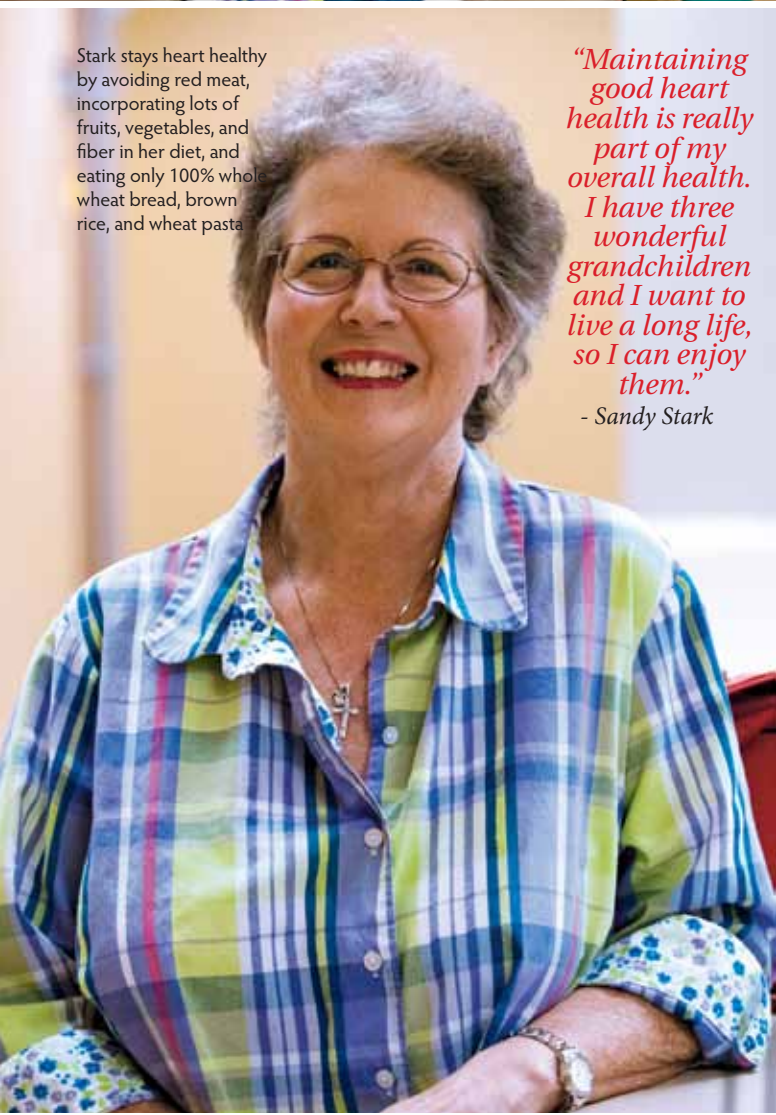
Melissa and Dr. Amit Manhas, who advises women to stay physically active, eat healthy foods, and avoid smoking for a heart-healthy lifestyle



Oldham underwent a heart catheterization procedure called ablation and now makes time to exercise and is looking into a structured weight loss program



Dr. Manhas and Sandy Stark, whose primary physician recommended she visit him for a heart checkup due to severe fatigue, nausea, and chest pain



Stark stays heart healthy by avoiding red meat, incorporating lots of fruits, vegetables, and fiber in her diet, and eating only 100% whole wheat bread, brown rice, and wheat pasta

“Maintaining good heart health is really part of my overall health. I have three wonderful grandchildren and I want to live a long life, so I can enjoy them.”

- Sandy Stark

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1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

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arteries. "If a friend of mine had been telling me her symptoms, I would've insisted on taking her to the hospital," she shares. "But when it comes to taking care of 'me,' you think, 'I'll go to the doctor tomorrow.'"

A Disease That Affects Any Age

At only 30 years of age, Becky Yanez of the American Heart Association has already survived cardiac disease. Her struggle began when she contracted rheumatic fever while on a mission trip in Russia. The damage to her heart from the illness went undetected until she had a routine athletic physical, which uncovered a heart murmur.

Before she turned 21, the former varsity softball player and dance captain was undergoing mitral valve replacement surgery. Complications from that surgery led to congestive heart failure.

Now as the recipient of a pacemaker and defibrillator, she is passionate about encouraging women to pay close attention to their health and appreciates the small things in life. Yanez urges all women to make time to take care of themselves. "Remember, you're not invincible," she says, adding, "It's not just our grandparents that can be affected." KM

JODY LANE enjoys writing and spending time with family and friends. Red is her favorite color.

WARNING SIGNS of Heart Failure

Visit a physician immediately if you notice any of the following symptoms

- Shortness of breath
- Persistent coughing or wheezing
- Swelling in the feet, ankles, legs, or abdomen
- Weight gain
- Tiredness or fatigue
- Lack of appetite or nausea
- Confusion, impaired thinking, or memory loss
- Increased heart rate



- Source: American Heart Association, heart.org



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