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### February is American Heart Month

Even though there is greater knowledge today about the causes of heart disease than ever before, and more innovative diagnostic tools to detect and treat heart disease, heart disease continues to be America's number one killer. In 2000 Cardiovascular disease claimed more lives than all the forms of cancer combined. Stroke is No. 3 and a leading cause of serious disability. It's important to reduce your risk factors, know the warning signs, and know how to respond quickly and properly if warning signs occur. This is especially important for women who seem to take better care of their families than they do of themselves.

Here are some other facts from the American heart Association:

- The risk of heart disease and stroke increase with age, and in the year 2000, over 42 million American women will be 50 and older.
- More women than men die of stroke.
- Low blood levels of "good" cholesterol (high density lipoprotein or HDL) appear to be a stronger predictor of heart disease death in woman than in men in the over 65 age group; high blood levels of triglycerides (another type of fat) may be a particularly important risk factor in women and the elderly.
- Regular physical activity and a healthy weight reduce the risk of non-insulin-dependent diabetes, which appears to be an even stronger contributing risk factor for heart disease in women than in men.
- Diagnosis of heart disease presents a greater challenge in women than in men.

Heart attacks result when the blood supply to part of the heart muscle is severely reduced or stopped. Because many heart attack victims do not recognize the warning signs until it is too late, only one in five is able to reach a hospital quickly enough to benefit from the treatments. This is especially true of women.

The first line of defense is to know the signs of heart attacks and stroke.

Some heart attacks are sudden and intense - the "movie heart attack" - where no one doubts what's happening. But most heart attacks start slowly, with mild pain or discomfort. Often people affected aren't sure what's wrong and wait too long before getting help. Here are signs that can mean a heart attack is happening:

- **Chest discomfort.** Most heart attacks involve discomfort in the center of the chest that

lasts more than a few minutes, or that goes away and comes back. It can feel like uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain. Because it can go away and come back women may think it is not a heart attack.

- **Discomfort in other areas of the upper body.** Symptoms can include pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach.
- **Shortness of breath.** This feeling often comes along with chest discomfort. But it can occur before the chest discomfort.
- **Other signs:** These may include breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea or lightheadedness.

If you or someone you're with has chest discomfort, especially with one or more of the other signs, don't wait longer than a few minutes (no more than 5, according to the American Heart Association) before calling for help. Call 9-1-1. Get to the hospital right away.

Calling 9-1-1 is almost always the fastest way to get lifesaving treatment. Emergency medical services staff can begin treatment when they arrive - up to an hour sooner than if someone gets to the hospital by car. The staff are also trained to revive someone whose heart has stopped. You'll get treated faster in the hospital if you come by ambulance also.

Far too many Americans are also unaware of the dangers of cardiac arrest, in which the heart suddenly loses its ability to function. Most cases of cardiac arrest that result in sudden death occur when the diseased heart's electrical impulses become rapid and then chaotic. About 95 percent of sudden cardiac arrest victims die before reaching the hospital. However, if they had recognized what was happening and called 9-1-1, or CPR or an external defibrillator had been available and used immediately, this number would be much lower.

Cardiac arrest strikes immediately and without warning. Here are the signs:

- Sudden loss of responsiveness. No response to gentle shaking.
- No normal breathing. The victim does not take a normal breath when you check for several seconds.
- No signs of circulation. No movement or coughing.

If cardiac arrest occurs, call 9-1-1 and begin CPR immediately. If an automated external defibrillator is available and someone trained to use it is nearby, involve them.

The American Stroke Association says these are the warning signs of a stroke:

- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body.
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination
- Sudden, severe headache with no known cause

If you or someone with you has one or more of these signs, don't delay! Immediately call 9-1-1 so an ambulance can be sent for you. Also, check the time so you'll know when the first symptoms appeared. It's very important to take immediate action. If given within three hours of the start of symptoms, a clot-busting drug can reduce long-term disability for the most common type of stroke.

Nothing is more important than arming yourself with the knowledge to battle heart disease.