

Mail Today

# Brave Hearts

**Multitasking is an integral part of a woman's lifestyle these days. Gen Y women seek perfection, increasing their own susceptibility to cardiac diseases. But even heart attacks have not daunted these two women who talked to SASWATI SARKAR. They say their recovery has been accelerated by the lifestyle changes incorporated by them into their hectic schedules**

**T**HERE is in every true woman's heart, a spark of heavenly fire, which lies dormant in the broad daylight of prosperity, but which kindles up and beams and blazes in the dark hour of adversity," wrote Washington Irving, the famous American author of the late 18th century. But what happens when brave female hearts become too fragile to carry the spark of heavenly fire? Today cardiovascular disease is the largest cause of fatalities among women across the globe. This fact has completely dispelled the notion that women are less prone to cardiac problems than men.

Women are believed to be protected from heart disease in their youth by the hormone estrogen, which the body stops producing once menopause arrives. But this no longer appears to be true. Now younger women are equally affected by heart diseases. "Coronary Artery Disease (CAD) is on the rise these days among younger women. And the culprit is our modern lifestyle. Starting from workplace stress and hypertension to smoking and the thriving junk food culture - everything plays a big role in making women vulnerable to heart problems," says Dr Roopa Salwan, senior interventional cardiologist, Max Heart and Vascular Institute. Smoking releases chemicals that injure the lining of the arteries and increases the risk of blood clotting. Processed food, on the other hand, is normally high in trans fat content which enhances the risk of heart disease: A major women's health investigation, *The Nurses Health Study*, showed that women who ate the most trans fats were more than three times as likely to develop heart disease as those who consumed the least.

Many other factors also come into play. "Let's not blame lifestyle alone. A strong family history is another reason for the increase of cardiac problems among young women," points out Salwan. She says that innate heart diseases often go undetected during childhood, and are discovered only during pregnancy when symptoms develop due to the additional load of the foetus on the heart. "These problems are unique to our country and are never spoken of as women historically have not been included in scientific research to the extent men have been."



KAUSHIK ROY  
Hemlata has bounced back to life even after three angioplasties

Rheumatic heart disease is yet another cardiac issue faced by women. "This causes a leakage or narrowing of the heart valves and affects young women who are unaware of the problem till pregnancy. The worst part is that the symptoms are silent," explains Salwan.

**H**EMLATA NAIR, who belongs to the faculty of nursing at Jamia Hamdard University, had a tryst with CAD when she was just 32. A mother of two, this 39-year old lady underwent three angioplasties, which didn't hinder the flow of her life. She is back in the swing of life today, tackling her job as energetically as she always has.

Hypertension is finally what took a toll on her cardiac health. She prides herself on her streak of perfectionism. Being a sincere teacher is her mission, and this often drives her to extremes. "I am always running after my students so that they perform better. Moreover, my husband was abroad. So the entire responsibility of the kids was on me," she narrates. But now she is much more relaxed with her husband around. "He takes care of the household responsibilities and leaves me free to pursue my career," says Nair. Her concerned daughters are also careful to avoid subjecting her to undue stress. Nair is conscious about going for a 45-minute morning walk, has a daily session of yoga and is under regular allopathic and ayurvedic medication. "Earlier, I never used to pay attention to myself. Now I pamper myself more and don't let anxiety take me over. I have consciously become tension free and happy - that is the mantra of my life now," Nair says.

As far as her diet is concerned, she lives mostly on high fibre food, fruits and salads, and eats a daily handful of walnuts and almonds to increase her low-density lipoprotein (LDL) count.

**ASHA RAWAL**, 48, is a senior consultant in the obstetrics and gynecology department of the Max Hospital, Pitampura. She had a heart attack in March this year. "While driving back home from the clinic, I had a choking feeling in my throat accompanied by a burning sensation in the middle portion of my chest," she recalls. Mother of an adult son, this active doctor was back at work within three weeks of her angioplasty. She resumed her normal life with an amazing ease, making it seem as though nothing had happened. "I had no symptom of any heart problem before March except that I would feel exhausted a lot of the time.

But I ignored this, since I was otherwise totally fit," she recalls. The anterior division of her left artery was 60 per cent blocked. However, there was not much damage, since the blockage was in the lower part of the artery. Amazingly, Rawal's blood pressure, sugar and cholesterol levels were normal even on the day she was admitted to the hospital. "This is surely because I have always maintained a lifestyle that is actually too healthy to invite a disease like CAD," Rawal adds.

**Trigger:** Early menopause and a strong family history of heart diseases. Mother died at the age of 46 from a major heart attack. Maternal uncle and dad also had cardiac problems.

**Diet:** Avoids heavy food, aerated drinks and junk food. Uses rice bran oil for cooking. "Earlier I used to put two spoons of oil in the vegetables.



ANAND NIGRA  
Now one spoon is the limit," she says.

**Lifestyle:** She has always maintained a healthy lifestyle sans any additions, be it smoking or drinking. "I go for a morning walk for five days a week which keeps me fresh throughout the day. And I have not cut down on my work hours as well," says Rawal, a big smile of pride lighting up her face.

**Mindset:** In her personal and professional life this busy doctor is a cool customer. "I have always been a chilled out personality. The only change I see in myself now is that I want to live in the present, that is, today, this moment - not tomorrow. Even if I want to give someone a gift, I don't keep it pending for tomorrow. I do it today itself," she declares happily.