

THE ONE-MINUTE HEART ATTACK TEST

When you sit down to watch television or read a book, how fast is your heart beating? You might want to count the number of times your heart beats in one minute. Middle-aged women who have a higher resting heart rate are far more likely to have a heart attack.

This is a simple and inexpensive way to monitor your heart health. Your resting heart rate is measured in beats per minute and is a way to test how well your heart is working when it is not stressed.

THE BOTTOM LINE: People who have heart rates of 76 beats per minute and higher were found to be 26 percent more likely to have a heart attack or die from heart disease than those with heart rates of 62 beats per minute or lower.

It's well-established that higher heart rates are associated with a higher risk for heart attack.

Call it an early warning sign. Heart rate should be part of a physician's overall assessment of coronary risk in women as well as men. Interestingly, heart rate doesn't seem to matter in younger women.

So what do you do if your heart rate is 76 or higher? If you're over 50, you should take it seriously, and that means making lifestyle changes. Eat a low-fat diet; lower your blood pressure through exercise, medication or both; avoid obesity; and become physically active. The key to good heart health is physical activity. Exercise increases the tone of the autonomic nervous system, which causes a decrease in heart rate and a decrease in blood pressure.

Heart disease, which is the world's leading cause of death, is primarily caused by fatty deposits that harden and block arteries and high blood pressure that damages blood vessels.