If you are a woman and you think breast cancer is the disease for which you are at highest risk, think again. Heart disease is the number-one killer of women. According to the American Heart Association, one out of every two women in America will die from a heart related illness, while statistics show one in 27 will die from breast cancer. Only 8 percent of women consider heart disease their greatest threat, however it should one of the top priorities to all women as a disease that can be prevented.

For women, heart disease is a condition that generally occurs in older females, usually after menopause. And although it is the top killer of both men and women in America, it is touted by the media as a disease associated with men.

“Women have either a lesser awareness or diminished concern about heart disease being the number-one killer of women because it happens later in life and the treatment also seems less terrifying than cancer diagnosis and treatment, which may imply more pain and suffering,” said Deenie Redmile, San Diego nurse practitioner.

According to the American Heart association, after menopause, women are more likely to have heart attacks than men. In fact, 38 percent of women compared with 25 percent of men will die within one year after having a heart attack.

Because these statistics are shocking, it is most important to look at what women can do to reduce the risk of heart attack.

“In general, there is no ‘easy’ approach for prevention,” Redmile said.

Maintaining a healthy diet, high in fiber and low in saturated fats and cholesterol is key. As well, 30 minutes of moderate exercise a day is recommended.

“For most people, it is necessary to practice real discipline with regards to diet and exercise,” Redmile said. “Often, people feel they are eating normal amounts of food, or feel too busy with life stressors to prepare healthy meals at home on a regular basis.”

Snacking on vegetables instead of chips or grilling veggieburgers instead of hamburgers are some simple ways to help improve an on-the-go diet. As well,
drinking low-fat milk instead of whole milk is an easy way to lower fat intake.

Redmile also mentioned that it is often more difficult for women to get an appropriate amount of exercise.

“One down side of women ‘doing everything now’ is that there has not generally been much enhancement of the role of men in the home, so sometimes women are overextended,” Redmile said.

One way to increase activity for an on-the-go woman is to spend active time with children, such as going on walks. Gardening and cleaning are also forms of mild exercise, however, scheduling at least half an hour each day to exercise — perhaps to jog, walk or even jump-rope — is necessary in heart disease prevention.

Also, it is important for women to know the signs of heart-related problems so they can get timely medical treatment.

“When I discuss heart disease with women, I generally describe the symptoms as being of a more subtle nature, or even confused with indigestion in women more than men,” Redmile said.

According to the American Heart Association, women have less common signals of heart attacks, such as nausea, fatigue and dizziness, as well as the classic signals, such as shortness of breath, chest pain and tightness, and pain in the arm.

Warning signs of stroke include a sudden weakness or numbness of the face or limb on one side.

The good news is, if preventative methods are taken, women can significantly lower their risk of heart disease. Through diet and exercise, as well as awareness, women can lessen their chances of dying from this disease.