Heart disease is an equal opportunity threat, but black women need to pay special attention to its risks.

Across the globe, heart disease is the No. 1 cause of death for both women and men. And it affects one in three American adult females, says the National Institute of Nursing Research (NINR). Women find themselves with symptoms and risk factors that men don’t—including menopause, when cardiovascular-friendly estrogen levels fall.

That’s especially important for women of African descent, as this group has much higher rates of cardiovascular disease than non-Hispanic whites.

Why such a high risk for black women? There’s a genetic component (the American Heart Association says research has found a gene that makes African-Americans more sensitive to salt), but lifestyle’s a strong reason, too. And the reasons and risk factors behind their larger predisposition to heart disease are many, says the Heart Association. Think diabetes. Obesity. High blood pressure.

For generations, adult females have often felt they needed to be "superwomen"—putting the needs of their kids, families and significant others first and placing themselves last. Such caretaking may be cultural, but it can affect their health.

Since February is both Black History Month and Heart Health Month in the United States, it’s a good time to pump up the focus on cardiovascular conditions that particularly affect black women.

"It's making (health) a priority for themselves as women," says Dr. Jennifer Jones-McMeans (shown at left), director of clinical programs and endovascular clinical science for Abbott's vascular business who's studied the link between genetics, exercise, and high blood pressure.

“Historically, African-Americans have been an underserved population when it comes to healthcare and diet and physical activity,” she says. "All that comes together. Unless we say, 'I'm going to exercise and take ownership of it,' it won't happen. I'm no good for my family if I'm not healthy."

Here are seven proactive lifestyle steps Dr. Jones-McMeans and other Abbott experts suggest black women can take to be smart about their hearts all year long.

1. Keep it moving.* Of all the ways to reduce your heart disease risk factors, aerobic exercise that gives your heart and lungs a workout is one of the best. And you don't need a pricey gym membership or state-of-the-art bike to get it. Says Abbott EAS Sports Nutrition Performance Coach Rob Williams: "It can be jumping rope, doing jumping jacks, and even (climbing) stairs in your house. That's going to keep your heart rate elevated." And these all will help you net the 150 minutes of moderate exercise or 75 minutes of vigorous exercise the American Heart Association recommends each week. Williams, who's trained high school, collegiate and pro athletes, says movement can help you manage blood pressure and cholesterol levels, not to mention keep off the extra weight that also puts you at risk for cardio conditions. Adds Jones-McMeans: “Your heart is a muscle that needs to work, so we have to keep ourselves as active as possible to keep the heart healthy.”

2. Eat for your heart. We know it's not always easy to eat heart-healthy foods—especially when rich desserts, crunchy fried snacks, and all-you-can-eat buffets are calling your name. But keeping your ticker in good shape is key—and that
means a diet that limits saturated and trans fats, cholesterol, and sodium while boosting your intake of plant-based fats (think canola oil and avocados) and omega-3 fats like tuna and salmon. Potassium-rich foods like oranges, bananas, and tomatoes help your heart beat properly and can lower blood pressure, too. Abbott registered dietitian Abby Sauer suggests recipe swaps (think sweet potatoes instead of white ones; low-fat yogurt vs. heavy cream) that increase your intake of vitamins and nutrients. Also, when you can, skip the carry-out and choose home-cooked dishes. “Meals at home do more than just provide the food on the plate,” Sauer says. "It's the emotional connection. Think about all the good that does for your heart."

3. Watch your weight.* It's important to maintain a healthy one. The Black Women's Health Imperative reports that four out of five black women are considered overweight or obese – and that extra weight is a huge heart disease risk factor. Cutting calories and boosting exercise is key to keeping pounds off, cholesterol levels in check—and preventing Type 2 diabetes. One trick, says Abbott EAS Sports Nutrition's Rob Williams: eat off smaller plates. “If you have a big plate,” he says, “you’re prone to fill up every single inch.” Dr. Jennifer Jones-McMeans of Abbott's vascular business realizes that socioeconomic factors like limited food choices and safe exercise options can play a role in some black women's weight challenges. But “fit in exercise based on what works for you. Take extra steps when you're at work instead of sitting at your desk. Can you get out with your kids, even if it just means walking?”

4. Keep blood pressure down. Left untreated, high blood pressure, or hypertension, can cause everything from a stroke to heart failure. Medical Director Dr. Olga Carron from Abbott's established pharmaceuticals business in Central America and the Caribbean says that folks of African descent across the Americas have similar high incidences of this condition. She stresses the importance of taking blood pressure-regulating medicines as prescribed. "From there, start with changing your lifestyle and diet. That likely means increasing your physical activities gradually, as well as choosing healthy food," as losing weight can help lower blood pressure. "If you need help, you should speak to a physician or registered dietitian first to create a plan that works for you."

5. Manage diabetes – or prevent it. Dealing with diabetes is critical in the fight against heart disease. Diabetes doubles your risk for heart attack or stroke, says Abbott Scientific Affairs Director Karmeen Kulkarni—and like blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans have a higher genetic predisposition toward the condition. Over time, says the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, high blood glucose levels can damage your nerves and blood vessels—and that can lead to complications including heart disease and stroke. Kulkarni says sedentary lifestyles and less-than-healthy food choices increase the risk for both diabetes and heart disease. That's why carbohydrate intake and portion size matter. She suggests "cultivating a taste for legumes and dried beans" that don't cause a huge spike in blood glucose levels. When cooking family-favorite dishes, Kulkarni says "you can keep the flavors the same, but not all the salt and not the unhealthy fats."

6. Know your numbers. Are you aware of your blood pressure, cholesterol and blood glucose levels? What about your heart rate, body mass index, and weight? It's hard to change what you don't know. You'll also want to “know your family history and who had heart disease and at what age,” says Dr. David Spindell of Abbott's diagnostics business. "If Grandma had a heart attack at 90, that does not necessarily mean as much as if Grandma had a heart attack at 55 – because if she had a heart attack at 55, we need to have a conversation." Adds Dr. Olga Carron of Abbott's established pharmaceuticals business in Central America and the Caribbean: "There are also a lot of people with high numbers that do not exhibit symptoms. With a simple blood test, they can prevent lots of complications that can affect their lives in the short or long term. Creating a prevention mindset is our goal."

7. Keep stress in check.* Life itself can be stressful, but finding ways to handle and manage it is essential to our overall well-being. Chronic stress can lead to behaviors like smoking, drinking, and poor eating habits as well as changes
to your blood and nervous system, which the World Heart Federation says can increase heart disease risk. Physical exercise can help combat stress by releasing the feel-good chemical dopamine, says Abbott's Rob Williams, as can activities like needlepoint or meditation that let your mind relax. Historically, spirituality and faith have been central to black culture — and studies have shown those also can play a beneficial role in helping keep stress and its less-than-healthy coping behaviors at bay.