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## Q&A with Dr. Joan Briller

Dr. Joan Briller, a cardiologist at UI Health recently spoke with the Wellness Connection's Seth Yoder to talk about her areas of expertise.

### Question:

Tell us about your background, what inspired you to pursue a career in Cardiology?

### Answer:

I began my career in the field of anthropology. While working in Brazil I was introduced to public health officials who inspired me to pursue a career in medicine. I completed my Medical Degree at the University of Connecticut, then relocated to Chicago to complete my residency at Northwestern University Medical Center. During my residency I became fascinated by the heart and how it operated similarly to a pump. At U. of C. in cardiology training, I became increasingly aware of the void in research on cardiovascular disease in women and since then I have made it my goal to bring more attention the area of women's heart health. I have been a cardiologist at UI Health specializing in women's cardiovascular disease, heart disease effecting pregnancy and echocardiography for more than 20 years.

### Question:

To what factors do you attribute most heart symptoms: age, gender, weight, stress levels, eating habits, amount of exercise?

### Answer:

All of these factors contribute to heart disease. The most risk common factors and easiest to identify and correct or treat are: high blood pressure, smoking, high cholesterol, diabetes, family history, sedentary lifestyle, and obesity. Stress plays an important role too, but may be harder for us to control, although exercise and meditation are helpful. Some pregnancy related complications such as preeclampsia and gestational diabetes are unique risk factors for women. We now also recognize that collagen vascular disease and some cancer therapies can contribute.

### Question:

It is often said that sitting in your office all day is as bad as smoking. With that in mind, what would you recommend to employees who work in an office setting to improve the health of their heart?

### Answer:

Everyone that works indoors, particularly in front of a computer, should find ways to stand and move. If you are unable to obtain a standing desk or get outdoors, indoor solutions could include walking up and down a flight of stairs or simply making a loop around the office. People should be encouraged to take meetings outside and incorporate some type of movement into work-related activities.

### Question:

With our busy schedules, it can be hard to find time to exercise. Do you have any recommendations on simple exercises people can do to improve the overall health of their heart?

### Answer:

Sitting most of the day is certainly not good for any one. We recommend that you incorporate 150 minutes of moderate exercise or 75 minutes of vigorous exercise into your week. This can be broken up into sessions as short as 10 minutes and still give benefit. Moderate exercise is an activity you can do while still maintaining a conversation but should involve some effort. Vigorous exercise is an activity where it would be challenging to maintain a conversation. When choosing physical activities it's important to find something you enjoy; this leads to greater satisfaction and motivation. Remember when time is tight that some activity is better than none.

### Question:

What types of food should we eat more and less of?

### Answer:

A good rule of thumb is to include more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and less processed foods. A simple way to think about your day



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to day diet is to divide your plate into half vegetables, a quarter protein, and a quarter whole grains. It is also a good idea to moderate the amount of salt you eat. When it comes it making changes to your diet, similar to exercise it is important to set reasonable expectations. Start small with one change towards a healthier diet, then when you are comfortable with that one, you can make the next one. A heart healthy diet is for your lifetime not for a week or two.

### Question:

At what age do you recommend seeing a doctor to discuss heart health? And how often?

### Answer:

No patient is ever too young to meet with a health care provider to discuss heart health. When you visit your family or primary doctor to discuss heart health you should ask your doctor about any concerning symptoms. These might include "classic" symptoms like chest discomfort with exercise, but women often report less typical symptoms like fatigue. Moreover, if you are having the following symptoms then you should seek medical treatment as soon as possible: chest discomfort, shortness of breath, not able to complete normal physical activities, marked leg swelling, heart palpitations to the point of feeling like you might faint. You should conclude your discussion with questions about risk factor prevention and treatment for symptoms. ■