



Georgia Association of School Nurses

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Georgia School Nurses Raise Cardiovascular Disease Awareness During American Heart Month

BRUNSWICK, GA... Georgia school nurses launched a major campaign to educate teachers, staff and parents about the signs and symptoms of cardiovascular disease, as well as ways to lead a heart-healthy lifestyle, in February, which is American Heart Month.

This month, school nurses across the state received electronic tool kits with hand-outs, bulletin board postings and programs to increase the number of staff and parents who can recognize and respond to early warning signs and symptoms of stroke and heart attack. The materials were developed through a joint partnership of the Georgia Association of School Nurses' (GASN) Cardiovascular Health Task Force, Georgia's state Cardiovascular Health Program (CVH) and Healthy People 2020, a federal initiative that sets nationwide health improvement priorities.

Cardiovascular disease, including heart attack and stroke, is the number one killer for both men and women nationwide and in the state of Georgia. One often thinks of school nurses serving students, but they also safeguard the health of teachers and staff, who comprise Georgia's largest workforce and are predominantly women, said GASN President Lisa Byrns.

"Students learn best when they have healthy, focused teachers," she added. "We are challenging school nurses around the state to take ownership of this dismal outcome and work together to turn it around."

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A key task force goal is to combat a widely-held misconception that women are at lower risk of dying from heart disease than men, said Alison Ellison, task force chairperson and coordinator of Project S.A.V.E., a Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta program which assists schools in becoming heart-safe.

“Women seem to be less aware of their heart risk than men, and that lack of awareness sometimes even extends to their doctors,” Ellison added. “For women, the signs and symptoms of heart disease can be more subtle, so for all these reasons, it’s important for them to have the right information to advocate for themselves and know when to speak up and say, ‘please check my heart.’”

The task force, which includes 24 nurses from across the state, encourages school nurses to include signs and symptoms of heart attacks and strokes in health fairs and other worksite wellness events. It also is collaborating with Project S.A.V.E. to provide regionally accessible training where nurses can get certified to lead CPR training courses for staff, students and the community.

Since Project S.A.V.E.’s founding in 2004, one third of Georgia’s schools have qualified for recognition as Project S.A.V.E. heart-safe schools. Even more significantly, 28 people (12 students and 16 adults) at these schools are alive today because another staff member recognized they were having a sudden cardiac arrest, understood how to administer CPR, had an automated external defibrillator (AED) at the school and knew how to use it, Ellison said.

“You never know when you may be a witness to a heart attack, and if you’re the victim, you certainly would want someone around who knows what action to take to save your life,” she added.

The Cardiovascular Task Force is one of six task forces focusing on specific health conditions and related issues which GASN founded at its 18th Annual Statewide Education Conference held July 13-15, 2010, in Savannah, the theme of which was “On the Road to Wellness – School Nurses Partnering for Healthy People 2020!” Other GASN task forces focus on Asthma, Cancer, Tobacco Use Prevention, Oral Health and Immunization.

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The Georgia Association of School Nurses (GASN) was organized in 1991 to unite school nurses committed to providing quality health care services to school children. GASN remains dedicated to promoting excellence in school health through its continued education programs and advocacy. For more information, visit www.gasn.org.

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Some Facts and Figures About Women and Heart Disease

Heart Disease is the number one killer of women in the United States.

More women die of heart disease than all cancers combined.

Heart disease and stroke kill more women than the next seven causes of death combined.

350,000 Americans die of sudden cardiac arrest each year—almost 1,000/day. Over 50% of those might be saved if more people knew CPR and more public AEDs were deployed.

Women are relatively protected from CV disease before menopause, but catch up quickly, then surpass men in the decade after menopause.

2/3 of strokes happen to women.

2/3 of women have no warning signs before their first heart attack.

2/3 of women never recover full function after a heart attack.

2/3 of women who survive strokes suffer significant disability for the rest of their lives.

But most CV disease is preventable—70-80% of heart attacks and strokes are caused by lifestyle—the sum of the choices we make each day. Making different choices, starting with exercise will change your life.

The most sedentary women are five times more likely to die than fittest women. Exercise reduces death rate for CV and cancer! (reduces risk and increases survival for top 4 kinds of cancer --by as much as 50%) So be sure to get your mammograms, but keep in mind that showing up at the gym and continuing to show up, is ten times more likely to save your life.

60 million Americans have some form of CV disease, and most don't know it (the vast majority of women over 50)—it's been the leading cause of death in women since 1918.

Being sedentary is classified as a major CV risk factor, increasing risk more than smoking or high cholesterol.

Your heart will beat roughly 4 billion times over your lifetime—hopefully! What you do, what you eat, how you live can make a difference—you have choices.

Compiled by the Cardiovascular Disease Task Force of the Georgia Association of School Nurses.