



## WHAT'S KILLING WOMEN

### *Heart Disease and Cancer Still Plaguing Women*

Enormous strides in medical science and technology over the past 100 years have contributed significantly to a longer life span for women. In 1900, the average life expectancy for a woman was 48, while in 1998, a woman could expect to live to 79 years of age. Women grew more interested in personal fitness and taking care of their bodies as the century progressed. However, in assuming careers outside the home and competing in a “man’s world” professionally, women were forced to contend with greater levels of stress and the toll it took on their bodies.

#### **Diseases of the Heart**

As for causes of death, heart disease is still the number one killer of women. During the second half of the

century heart disease accounted for around a third of women’s deaths. As **Figure 1** indicates, the female death rate for heart disease in 1950 was 233.9. That accounted for 35.2% of all female deaths. In 1980, the female death rate for heart disease dropped to 140.3, but still accounted for 38.9% of all female deaths.

Many women began taking notice and making significant lifestyle changes. They heeded medical advice that encouraged them to increase their level of exercise and eat a low-fat diet. Consequently, deaths from heart disease declined. In 1990, the female death rate for heart disease was 108.9 and in 1998, it had dropped even further to 93.3. This was significantly lower than the male death rate for heart disease in 1998 - 166.9.

The older women become, the more significant their risk for death by heart disease grows. Women ages 75-84 in 1998 had a death rate of 1,579.5 while women ages 85 and older that same year had a death rate of 5,876.6.

Still, deaths caused by heart disease continue to decrease. The current trend suggests that if women continue their commitment to regular exercise and a healthier diet, those numbers will continue to fall.

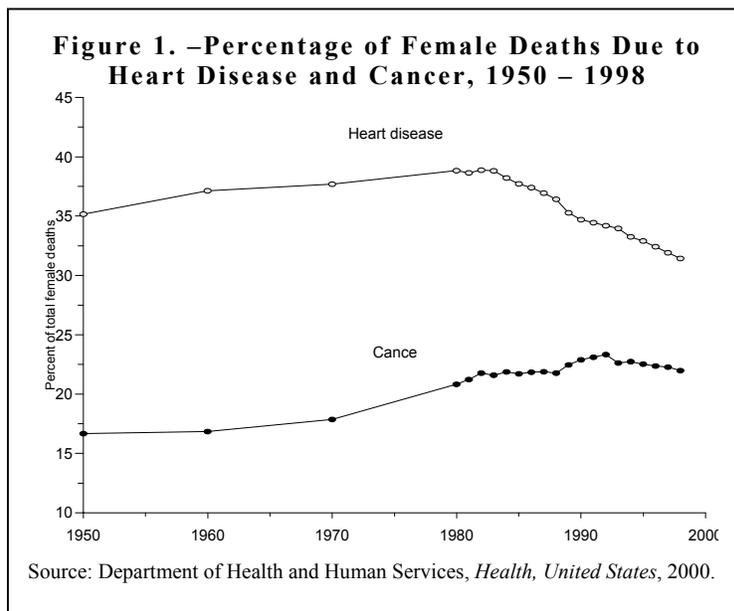
#### **Cancer**

While only accounting for between 15 to 20 percent of women’s deaths towards the middle of the century, cancer-related deaths have gradually increased since the 1970’s. At that time, the female death rate was 108.8. But in

1980, the rate had increased to 109.2 and in 1990 to 112.7.

As **Figure 2** shows, the highest levels of cancer-related incidences for women were caused by breast cancer. In 1975, there were 90 new cases of breast cancer for white females and 78.5 new cases for black females per every 100,000 females. By 1995, the number of new breast cancer incidences had risen to 115 for white females and 101.3 for black females per every 100,000 females.

In the last ten years, corporations and advocates have succeeded in raising the level of awareness of breast cancer. Thousands of Americans have begun participating in marathons, raising money for research,



and encouraging their female friends and loved ones to have mammograms for early detection.

Both lung and bronchial cancers have increased, almost doubling since the mid-1970's – from 20 new cases per 100,000 women to nearly 40 new cases per 100,000 women in the late 1990's.

Other cancers such as colorectal, lymphomas

and skin cancers have all increased, though not at the rates as breast cancer and lung and bronchial cancer.

Ovarian cancer has seen little change over the last two decades. The death rate for ovarian cancer was 14.6 in 1973 and fluctuated to 15.3 in 1996. Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, however, has increased with a death rate in 1973 of 7.6 to 12.7 in 1996.

**Figure 2. –Age-Adjusted Breast Cancer and Lung and Bronchus Cancer Incidence Rates for Females, By Race**

