

# IMPACT

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## Improving women's health and fitness in Idaho

### The Situation

Since 1984, heart disease has killed more women than men every year. Many more women are living with heart disease, which can seriously impact their quality of life. Guidelines for women to protect their heart are now available (American Heart Association). Following a lifestyle that includes a healthy diet, weight control, and appropriate levels of physical activity will reduce the risk of developing heart disease in women.

Everyone making heart healthy choices can improve their heart's health by following the recommendations for diet and physical activity. Heart health is no longer tied solely to family history and genetics; women can live heart healthy lives by making healthy selections. The scientific evidence suggests that women who eat a healthful diet and exercise regularly can enjoy an 84% reduction in the risk of cardiovascular death (Nurse's Health Study, 1976).

National survey data indicate that less than half of adults do not meet physical activity recommendations or eat enough fruit and vegetables daily.

### Our Response

Five University of Idaho Extension, Family and Consumer Sciences faculty were trained to implement the Strong Women-Healthy Hearts exercise/nutrition program state wide. The mission was to increase the number of women participating in safe and effective physical activity and promote healthy eating to reduce the risk of heart disease.

Strong Women – Healthy Hearts program, developed by Tufts University, is a twelve-week exercise and nutrition program. Participants attend classes for an hour two times per week. Program activities include effective exercise using dance or walking to increase



Strong Women—Healthy Hearts Boise Class

their cardiovascular capacity. Additionally, hands-on food preparation and nutrition education expand their view and taste of healthy food. This program provides middle age women with information and hands-on practice to develop new habits for health.

For this pilot program Ada and Bannock Counties offered three classes and began with an average of 15 participants per program, with an average of 11 people finishing the full twelve weeks of classes. The average age of the class participants was 60 years, with the age range from 44 to 83 years of age.

### Program Outcomes

Participants completed pre- and post-surveys for weight, Body Mass Index (BMI), daily servings of fruit and vegetables and physical activity. As a result of the Strong Women – Healthy Hearts program, participants reported these changes: a decrease in weight averaging 2.5 – 4 pounds, a decrease in BMI, and a

.9 increase in the average servings of fruit and vegetables per day.

Physical activity was measured in MET minutes (metabolic equivalent is a ratio of the rate of energy expended during an activity to the rate of energy expended at rest). Women in the class increased their activity level (MET minutes), almost doubling their minutes of activity and reduced their time sitting from 387 minutes to 255 minutes per week. Substantial scientific evidence indicates that increases in MET minutes will produce health benefits for adults.

Table 1: Participant responses to a program satisfaction survey using a five point Likert Scale (1 not at all, 5 very much) in percentage.

As a result of participating in the class	Very much
Is your health better?	66%
Do you feel physically stronger?	60%
Do you have more energy?	60%
Do you sleep better?	48%
Are you eating healthier?	64%
Have you become more active?	60%

Anecdotal comments from women completing the class:

“Due to the support and encouragement from the class, I realized I was addicted to sugar. I decided to join Overeaters Anonymous. I would not have taken that step without this class!” A second participant lowered her cholesterol sufficiently to avoid taking medication. Another expressed that she had never felt better in her adult life than while she was taking these classes.

In the future, the success of Strong Women – Healthy Hearts in Ada and Bannock Counties will continue to expand as volunteer trainers are recruited and trained. More Idaho women will be able to translate nutrition and physical activity research into a lifestyle they can live with and enjoy. With the support of local physicians and other supporters more heart healthy programs will be offered to first time participants.

#### References

Heart Healthy Guidelines: American heart Association  
<http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/GettingHealthy/Diet-and-Lifestyle-Recommendations>.

Nurse’s Health Study 1976, long-term epidemiological studies conducted women's health, currently on phase 3 of the study, <http://www.nhs3.org>.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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