

Support Group for Women with Heart Disease Launched by UC San Diego Sulpizio Family Cardiovascular Center

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Eight million women in the United States suffer from cardiovascular disease, the leading cause of death among women. To provide support and education, UC San Diego Sulpizio Family Cardiovascular Center has launched a free monthly support group, WomenHeart, to serve women in the San Diego region. Meetings are held the third Tuesday of every month from noon until 1:00 p.m. at UCSD's Thornton Hospital in La Jolla. The meeting is free and open to all women in the community.

The WomenHeart support group was initiated by Susan Iliff, 59, a retired UC San Diego Medical Center nurse. Iliff had her first angina attack in her 50s, later followed by heart bypass surgery. A single mother of three, who also cared for her parents, Iliff found that simple conversation was key to relieving stress and keeping her health on track.

"We have this idea in our head that we're desperately needed by everyone around us—except ourselves. Yes, our kids need us. But more importantly, they need us to take care of our own health so that we can be there for them," said Iliff. "Believe me, it's easier to treat the early signs of heart disease than it is to wait and have a heart attack."

To help women connect with other female heart patients, Iliff became a trained group support leader for WomenHeart: the National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease, a national advocacy organization for women heart patients.

"Having a heart attack is scary. Going back to managing your family, excelling at work, attending to your home and investments, in addition to caring for your own heart can be even scarier. You need help. You need others to look out for you," said Iliff.

During each meeting, women talk about their personal experiences, listen to speakers, and share tips and information on their own treatments. Communication extends outside the support group in the form of daily emails, phone calls and personal visits. If any one participant undergoes a medical procedure or operation, fellow members visit and offer support where needed. As a sign of solidarity, the women wear a bright red scarf as reminder to take care of themselves.

“Every new member at UCSD receives a beautiful red knitted scarf,” said Iliff. “Just as each woman in the group is different, no two scarves are alike. The scarf travels with us to our medical appointments and on those days we need to remember that we are not alone and that we are loved.”

The Sulpizio Family Cardiovascular Center at UC San Diego developed the Women’s Cardiovascular Health Program to directly combat cardiovascular disease (CVD) in women. The program is led by a group of leading female physicians dedicated to helping women understand, prevent and treat the disease. To attend the WomenHeart support group, email Iliff at susan_iliff@sbcglobal.net.

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