

Dr. Sarah Samaan on heart health and the power of prevention

BY BRIT MOTT

CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE is the number one cause of death globally. More than 480,000 women die from it each year. Heart disease ranges from heart attacks, high blood pressure, and abnormal heart rhythms to stroke, atherosclerosis (cholesterol buildup in the blood vessels), and congestive heart failure.

Take charge of your heart with a little help from *The Smart Woman's Guide to Heart Health: Dr. Sarah's Seven Steps to a Heart-Loving Lifestyle*, written by Sarah Samaan, MD, FACC. Dr. Samaan offers easy action steps toward heart health from knowing your numbers to being hip to your hormones. The book covers both diet and exercise, as well as stress and depression.



Author **Dr. Sarah Samaan**.
Profile photo/Mike Newman

Named as one of “America’s Top Physicians” by Consumers’ Research Council of America, as well as a “Texas Super Doctor” by *Texas Monthly*, Dr. Samaan is a board-certified cardiologist, with additional certifications in echocardiography, nuclear cardiology, and internal medicine. She practices cardiology at Legacy Heart Center in Plano and at THE HEART HOSPITAL Baylor Plano, where she is co-director of the Women’s Cardiovascular Institute.

Born in London, Dr. Samaan grew up in Houston and attended Vanderbilt University Medical School. She was prepping for an interview for her cardiology fellowship when her father’s health took a turn for the worse. “I was leaving on a plane for my first set of interviews that day when one of his friends called me to tell me he had been found on the floor after having a stroke.”

Dr. Samaan shifts in her seat. “Wow, it was just like a light came on and I realized what an impact heart disease can have on families, and it’s not just that one event, it’s your whole life after that.”

Dr. Samaan has a family history of heart disease, including a grandmother who suffered a heart attack at 48, but her dad, who was 64, led an active lifestyle. In fact, he was a doctor—but that may have actually been the problem. “Even though he had high blood pressure, he didn’t take his medication; he thought he was beyond it,” says Dr. Samaan. “It was a huge slap in the face. We’re all human. We all have the responsibility to take care of ourselves.”

She asserts, “As doctors, we think we know what we need to know about heart disease, but when researching for this book, I found there’s so much more we don’t know and don’t incorporate into our practice.”

Part of that is because of the progressively occurring advances in technology. From a prevention standpoint, one of the latest

technological strides in cardiovascular care is the coronary calcium score. About a mammogram’s worth of radiation, it is a CAT scan for the heart to detect the earliest signs of heart disease that may not show up on a stress test.

“We can detect people who may need more attention or need to be on medication and start intervening early,” explains Dr. Samaan. “Preventing heart disease must become a way of life—a commitment to an active lifestyle, an investment in a healthy diet, and a resolution to live mindfully aware that all of our choices carry consequences.”

The doctor practices what she preaches. She goes to the gym regularly, de-stresses with yoga, rides horses, and eats healthy foods. Her diet of choice is the Mediterranean diet. “It’s simple for people to follow and it’s food that tastes good—whole grains, fruits, vegetables, olive oil, fish, very little meat. If there is meat involved, it’s free-range animals.”

She adds, “Studies have shown in heart attack survivors, a 30–40 percent reduction rate in death for people who eat this way.”

The catch? No fast foods or processed foods.

“I hate to say it, but fast food is going to lead to our demise as a country.”

Fast food or coffee—Dr. Samaan reports in her book that caffeine is active in the bloodstream for up to nine hours.

She laughs. “A little coffee is okay...except for the whipped cream.”

And the Sweet’N Low and saccharine? “They’re not natural. Our bodies were not made to digest those things,” she says.

If you purchase Dr. Samaan’s book, check out the chapter called “The Big Fake Out: The Skinny on Sweeteners and Other Food Fakes.” (See excerpt.)

Speaking of “fakes,” there is a lot of debate over pills and supplements. Dr. Samaan believes in the power of natural foods. “I think we try to strong-arm Mother Nature in a sense and try to overpower our bodies with really high doses of vitamins. In the ’80s and early ’90s that was a really big trend, but it turned out that really high doses were actually causing us harm. High doses of folic acid can cause cancer in some people. High doses of vitamin E can make people with heart disease more prone to heart failure. High doses of selenium can increase one’s risk of diabetes, and it goes on and on. And folic acid is not bad. Foods that are high in folic acid or foods that are high in vitamin E are actually protective for our hearts. It’s how Mother Nature packages everything together.”

She concludes, “People come to me with bags and bottles of pills, but they continue to smoke or eat at



McDonald's, and you can't fix the bad things you're doing by supplementing with pills. We're kind of hard-wired to want the high-fat foods because that's what allowed us to survive hundreds of years ago. But we can make smarter choices to improve our quality of life, and for a parent, to improve the quality of life for their child by setting them out on the right path. Good health is truly a journey, not a destination."

For more information about Dr. Samaan's book, visit smartwomanshearthealth.com.

excerpt

From *The Smart Woman's Guide to Heart Health*

We may be smart, but when it comes to sugar our brains seem to go a little gooey. Sugar is the original sweetener, and the average American shovels in more than 135 pounds of it per year, much of it from sugar-saturated soft drinks; children may put away more. Our addiction to sugar has fueled the burgeoning rates of diabetes and obesity in adults and kids alike. Pancreatic cancer has been linked to high levels of sugar consumption. How can something so sweet be so wrong?... Chug a single can of soda pop, and you've bought yourself the equivalent of a whopping 10 teaspoons of table sugar. Just for kicks, measure out 10 teaspoons of sugar and see what that looks like. Shocking, isn't it?



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Dr. Garza has been featured on Good Morning Texas & NBC 5 News.

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