

Order your copy today!  
Amazon | Charisma Direct | Barnes & Noble

*Dr. Carol's Guide to*  
**WOMEN'S  
HEALTH**

CAROL PETERS-TANKSLEY, MD, DMin

SILLOAM

## Chapter 1

# WHAT IS A HEALTHY WOMAN?

**A**RE YOU HEALTHY? How healthy are you? If you were to walk through some magical doorway that made you instantly and completely healthy, would you recognize yourself? What would be different about you then compared to the person you are right now?

Thankfully, we've come a long way from the idea that health is simply the absence of disease. Health involves our ability to function at our best in every area of our lives. It doesn't happen by accident. As with most good things, the more intentional you are about understanding and taking responsibility for your health, the better the outcome you will achieve.

Women's health has become a hot topic in twenty-first-century culture. When you hear that term—*women's health*—you probably think first of the kind of health care you would receive at a women's clinic or your OB-GYN physician's office. And there are plenty of people who have made women's health a topic of political and social controversy. In some ways, that's been a good thing. The controversies have brought some of the issues into the light.

But in other ways, the controversies over such things as contraception, abortion, and insurance coverage have obscured what women's health is really all about. A healthy woman is so much more than her reproductive organs. We do all women a disservice when we forget that.

Let's begin by looking at what a healthy woman—and therefore women's health—is all about.

## AN INTEGRATIVE VIEW OF HEALTH

Imagine the ideal woman in your mind. Oh, I know the popular media has idealized the skinny, teenage body with long hair, long legs, and large breasts. But let's get real for a moment. Try your best to get that Barbie picture out of your mind and imagine what a healthy woman would look like. Picture a woman the age you are right now, since you can't undo your birthdays.

Certainly, your ideal woman wouldn't be sick, but that would only be

a start. I'm sure you picture her looking healthy in every way. She would have bright, clear eyes that sparkle when she looks at you. Her skin would be glowing, and her hair would look alive. She would be at a healthy weight. Her body would be strong, fully rested, and full of energy.

A woman can't look that way physically on the outside without being healthy on the inside. Rest, nutrition, and exercise certainly help. But her mental state makes a difference as well. You'd be able to tell right away if she were anxious, depressed, stressed, or worried, or even if she were feeling worked over by her hormones. You could get a good idea of what she was thinking about just from the look on her face.

Relationships also affect the way your ideal woman looks and feels. If you aren't sure about that, just look at the women in line the next time you go to the grocery store or sit in a doctor's office. Imagine what kind of personal relationships each woman has. You might see the anxious and angry divorcée, the happy grandmother married to the same man for fifty years, or the single businesswoman secretly hungry for a boyfriend. You might be wrong in what you imagine for each person, but the exercise shows you how much your relationships show in your face and behavior.

You can also tell a lot about your ideal woman's spiritual life by looking at her. Is she weighed down by guilt or shame? Is she anxious about what God thinks of her? Is she careless about the impact of her behavior on others? Does she feel her life has a purpose? Is she living with peace, joy, and love?

I hope you can see from this discussion how much each aspect of a woman's life impacts every other area. If you're sick physically, your emotions will be more difficult to handle. If your marriage is a mess, your body will be stressed. Whatever you do to get healthier in one area will positively benefit your health in every other area as well.

Understanding this integrative view of women's health is so important. Women of faith sometimes struggle here. On one hand, focusing on the eternal importance of one's spiritual life has led some to ignore the importance of developing a healthy lifestyle, healthy thinking, and healthy relationships. Likewise, some have made their physical health a primary goal without addressing the other dimensions of health that both affect and are affected by our physical well-being.

As a Christian woman, you have even more reason to take your health seriously. God made you spirit, soul, and body. He redeemed you spirit, soul, and body. His Holy Spirit makes your body His temple

(1 Cor. 6:19–20). And His plan for you is that “your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:23). God cares about your health, and you honor Him by caring about it as well.

Best of all, the ideal woman you imagined can be you. While you can’t entirely escape sickness or aging in this life, you can certainly slow them down. Too many women settle for too little. They accept being sick, tired, and miserable as normal. They may look to a pill, a specific diet, a new relationship, or an expensive program to make them feel better. Sometimes some of those things are necessary. But much more often what’s needed is simply for you to take charge of your health.

## TAKE CHARGE

Recently I was asked to perform a consultation on a sixty-one-year-old lady I’ll call Sarah who was hospitalized with multiple problems. She had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, sleep apnea, diabetes, and kidney failure. She had just returned from the cardiac suite after having an angioplasty for a small heart attack. She couldn’t walk without assistance, and her list of medications would keep a pharmacy in business. Her daughter had noticed some minimal vaginal spotting, which was the reason for my consultation.

As I read Sarah’s chart, her primary physician’s comment seemed so sad: “The patient and her family demonstrate no real interest in taking action to improve her health.” And after meeting with Sarah and her daughter, I could make a definite prediction: in twenty-five years, this patient’s daughter would be in the same physical state as her mother unless she made some dramatic changes.

None of that is necessary. There isn’t one of this patient’s problems that could not have been prevented by making some fairly modest lifestyle changes. And each one of her problems could be significantly improved by making some relatively simple changes right now. But she and her family aren’t interested. Instead, she will probably die soon. How tragic!

I don’t want you to end up like Sarah. In one twenty-minute consultation, I could do very little to stimulate Sarah to take charge of her health. But you’re reading this book. You’re taking your health seriously. You know there are things you need to know, understand, and do if you want to look, feel, and function at your best. And if

you do that, I can promise you that I won't be writing this about you when you're sixty-one!

If you're interested in feeling better, living longer, and being healthier in every way, here are some of the things you can do to take charge of your health and your health care:

- Accept the reality that your health is your responsibility, not that of your parents, your doctor, the government, or anyone else.
- Be intellectually hungry for information about things that impact your health.
- Be willing to examine your life for habits or behaviors that might be negatively impacting your health.
- Use the tools and information you find to actually make changes that will improve your health.
- Thoughtfully ask questions of health care professionals about things you don't know or understand.
- Become an informed consumer of health care, including medical tests, medications, supplements, and insurance alternatives.
- Think about your thinking, and practice healthier thinking in areas where you struggle.
- Search out professionals when you need extra help, and see yourself as a partner with them in making decisions and taking action.
- See yourself and God as working together for your maximum well-being in every area of your life.

Nobody else will ever care more about you and your health than you do. And if they do, it won't do you any good. It's your body, your health, your health care, your pocketbook, and your life that we're talking about. You get to choose what to do about it. Own it all, and I guarantee you'll be healthier than if you let anyone else take that responsibility from you.

## WHAT WOULD HEALTHY LOOK LIKE?

Driving through a major US city, I scanned the channels on the radio. The host of a locally popular talk show was promoting healthy living by

focusing on natural foods and supplements. She was a breast cancer survivor, and her passion to help others gain physical health was obvious.

Then she made a comment that shocked me. “I take over sixty pills a day, all of them supplements,” she said. “I take no medications.”

Now the idea of *natural* is a good one. I love natural! But sixty pills a day? There is absolutely no way even the most brilliant scientist, doctor, or nutritionist can tell you what effect that amount and variety of substances will have on your body. This is not about science. This is not about natural. This is about a desperation to be healthy.

I can sympathize with this talk-show host. Surviving cancer gives you a whole different perspective on life. When you’ve been sick, many people will do just about anything to regain their physical health. But sixty pills a day is not the answer. (OK, if you’ve had a heart transplant or have some other terribly serious condition, perhaps that many pills might be necessary.)

If you aim at nothing, you’ll reach it every time. You can’t be nineteen forever. (And would you really want to be?) And you don’t want to end up like Sarah. So it’s worth considering what being healthy would really look like.

Here’s a realistic picture of health that’s worth aiming for:

- **Fully alive physically.** You feel generally strong and energetic a majority of the time. You have no preventable lifestyle illnesses and are free from destructive lifestyle behaviors, such as substance abuse and unhealthy sexual behavior. You give your body an appropriate degree of tender loving care without making it the definition of who you are. You have the physical ability to fully engage in the work or vocation that fulfills the purpose God has for you.
- **Fully alive mentally and emotionally.** You’re able to experience the full range of human emotions—sadness, grief, pain, joy, love, hope, and more. You aren’t stuck in a constant state of anger, fear, anxiety, bitterness, or other destructive emotions. You’re able to choose what to think about and take personal responsibility for your thoughts and emotions.
- **Fully alive relationally.** If you’re married, your relationship with your spouse is characterized by mutual love and respect. If you’re single, you’re living a full and vibrant life connected with others in healthy ways. You have a full range

of relationships with other people characterized by mutuality, love, and growth. You seek out ways to benefit the lives of others while keeping your own heart full.

- ✦ **Fully alive spiritually.** You have a relationship with God that is resilient, growing, and real. You continue to experience God's transforming power in all aspects of your life. You demonstrate hope for the future in the middle of troubles now. You care about your heart and protect it with everything you have (Prov. 4:23). Your spiritual life provides a positive benefit to your physical, emotional, and relational health as well.

Being healthy is not synonymous with youth or beauty. It's not something you spend exorbitant amounts of money to attain, and it doesn't go away the moment you feel tired or need a prescription. It's not available only to those who have the perfect genetics or spend hours in the gym.

Being healthy means being fully alive in every area of your being, taking charge of what's in your control, and using all the resources you have available to handle challenges that inevitably come along. It's being the best *you* that you can be.

## HOW YOU SEE YOURSELF

*Self-image* has become an overused buzzword, but it expresses a vitally important concept. As Henry Ford is credited with saying, "Whether you think you can or think you can't, you're right." Take a moment right now and write down at least twenty words that you would use to describe yourself. Go ahead. Push yourself. I would guess that you can come up with a few quite easily but that it will become more difficult as you go along.

Here are some words you might use: *Pretty. Plain. Overworked. Resilient. Strong. Lonely. Fat. Confused. Unheard. Brash. Happy. Communicative. Smart. Connected. Youthful. Skinny. Tired. Shameful. Anxious. Lovely. Desirable. Distracted. Hopeful. Powerless. Weary. Fit. Old. Studious. Energetic. Creative. Healthy. Driven. Persistent. Caring. Loved. Mature. Frustrated. Graceful. Feminine. Powerful. Wise.*

Have you created your list? How well does it describe how you see yourself? How well do you think it describes the real you?

God sees you as you are now, but He also sees you as He created

you to be and as you can become. This exercise is designed to help you do the same and to show you how powerful your self-image is in relation to your health. If you really want to make this exercise powerful, create a second list of twenty words describing yourself five years from now. Are they different?

If you see yourself as tired, powerless, and old, you may easily become bitter at how life has done you wrong. You'll look for others to fix you and become frustrated and angry when they won't or can't do so. You won't take charge of your health. And I can promise you that in five years, you'll look and feel older, sicker, and more miserable than you do right now.

If, however, you see yourself as resilient, creative, and wise, you will almost certainly look and feel stronger and healthier in five years than you do right now. You'll take charge of your health and gratefully use resources to help you live and feel better. Your future will certainly present challenges, but you'll be up to the task. Your joy can increase regardless of what life brings.

I encourage you to choose the way in which you see yourself. None of us can do this perfectly, but you can become better at it. Surround yourself with positive people, high-quality resources, and well-chosen professionals when you need them. For women of faith, God's Word provides perhaps the best source of encouragement, wisdom, and truth available in this area. All these steps will help you see yourself as taking charge of your health, and as a result you'll become increasingly better at doing so.

## **DON'T DO IT ALONE**

Human beings are created for community, and we as women are perhaps especially needy in this area. The kinds of relationships you cultivate will make a huge difference in how helpful this book is to you and how healthy you are in the months and years ahead.

Here are a few ways you can become healthier through the people you spend time with:

- You can go walking regularly with a girlfriend.
- You can connect with other women who are facing a similar health problem as you are.

- You can work out a helpful signal with your husband to help you stop negative talking or thinking right away.
- You can talk about helpful ways to shop for and prepare healthful food with your coworkers or women's study group.
- You can invest in a volunteer opportunity or church group that brings you meaning and joy.
- You can open yourself to professional help when you need it, whether it be doctors, counselors, nutrition experts, or pastors.

There will always be people who know more than you do in certain areas. That's a good thing; take advantage of their knowledge and experience. That's part of what professionals are for, but it's also a benefit of connecting with others in many contexts. And when you can find other women to connect with who are also working toward being fully alive—healthy—in every area of their lives, you are blessed indeed.

Where does spirituality fit into becoming healthier? There's a whole chapter on healthy spirituality near the end of this book. If you're a woman of faith, remember that God cares about your health. His presence in your life will make a difference at every stage of your journey. Investing in a relationship with Him is the most important part of not doing it alone.

So let's jump right into the areas of women's health that you're most likely concerned about. Here I sit on my little rolling stool, ready to answer your questions and help guide you through the fascinating journey of becoming a healthy woman. Get ready to take charge of your health and your health care.

Order your copy today!  
Amazon | Charisma Direct | Barnes & Noble