

# TRI-COUNTY HEART INSTITUTE

## Dr. Nitza Alvarez not only focuses on just treating, but also preventing

Written by JOSEPH SIRIOTIS | Photos by NICHOLAS CONZONE



Dr. Nitza Alvarez

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The human heart beats at least 100,000 times per day. That adds up to 2.5 billion times over the course of a 70-year lifespan. It's what makes it one of the most unique parts of the human body, but even more unique are the factors that affect it between men and women.

**SPECIALIST IN THE PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT OF HEART DISEASES IN WOMEN, DR. NITZA ALVAREZ KNOWS ALL TOO WELL HOW THIS CAN AFFECT ANY PATIENT EXPERIENCE DURING A VISIT TO THE CARDIOLOGIST.**

The oldest of 10 siblings with eight of them girls, Alvarez saw a problem with the approach that's been taken to women's heart health when she was growing up in Ponce, Puerto Rico. They took the "bikini approach" to looking into a woman's health. A mammogram and Pap smear were done and a clean bill of health was issued depending on the results.

"We're looking at a woman and we're worrying about breast cancer, or cervical cancer," Alvarez said. "But then we're neglecting heart health it's the number one health threat, which is crazy. It's like somebody tells you that you have more chances of having your house flooded, but then you're worried about putting in nice ceiling."

Alvarez decided to practice medicine in The Villages after completing her residency in internal medicine and fellowship in cardiovascular diseases in Albany. Her time in the Empire State and first-hand experience with the negative health effects of the harsh city-life environment allowed her to ask an important question — why were we focusing on treatment instead of prevention for heart disease? She saw The Villages as the perfect location to practice medicine as the reviews from her mentors kept coming in. It was a vibrant community where every opportunity is given for residents to remain active. It also gave Alvarez the opportunity to focus on her own health: a warmer environment, a different pace of life and a closer bridge between her family in Puerto Rico.

"When I was going to come to Florida, I was already looking into how I can serve this community of people that are into preventive care," Alvarez said. "That's always been my passion — why do we focus so much into training people for the condition they've developed versus what we can do to help them stay healthy. Those people that are playing tennis or (any sport). Can we preserve that?"

Key to preventing heart disease is recognizing the difference between each patient, but also taking a new approach to understanding the various factors that affect men and women.

"The passion for women's health came from the neglect that exists for

a woman in healthcare when it comes to the heart in general," Alvarez said. "Women have been neglected for many years because of the information that we have. The studies that were done were in Caucasian males, and it was assumed that if it works for them, it would just be like an extrapolation that it will work for anyone else."

Not the case. While family history still plays an important role for both men and women, there are numerous other factors to be considered in women's heart health, such as endometriosis. It's a condition where cells similar to the lining of the uterus, or endometrium, grow outside of the uterus. It seems like a condition separate from affecting the heart. But it's also been associated with systemic chronic inflammation, heightened oxidative stress and an atherogenic lipid profile. As a result, women with this condition are 62% more likely to have a heart attack, develop chest pain or need heart procedures to open blocked arteries according to a study published by healthcare organization VIPcare. Chances rise up dramatically to a 400% increased risk for women under 40. Polycystic ovary disease also increases the risk for heart disease in women as symptoms include elevated cholesterol, high blood pressure, increased insulin levels and glucose intolerance. Pregnancy is another factor to consider. Over 700 women die each



year from pregnancy-related problems according to the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, with all leading causes related to heart health. Blood volume increases by 30-50% to nourish a growing baby, resulting in increased heart rate and high blood pressure. Other problems may also arise, such as diabetes and preeclampsia (high blood pressure with indicative damage to other organ systems, such as the kidneys).

"When we see a woman in the practice, we always ask about the pregnancy story," Alvarez said. A common mistake many women make is that after a successful pregnancy, they don't get a check up for any complications if they're not feeling any symptoms. "You go on living, thinking, 'I'm fine because I already had my baby.' And then 10, 15, 20 years later, maybe you find out that you have a weak heart, or that you have high blood pressure and nobody's been monitoring that."



That's only a handful of factors to consider. Alvarez recently published a book titled, "Heels vs Ties," where she goes into more detail on a full list of what causes heart disease and how women can diagnose and prevent heart related issues, as well as numerous resources they can turn to. Every woman and man would benefit by reading this exceptional book, one reviewer said.

"We have to look at them as different entities," Alvarez said. "It's about time medicine started looking at us like we are a different entity. If you start with that approach, you have more chances in saving more lives than if you start with an approach of trying to make you fit in a box that you don't fit in."

That's why Alvarez is a strong advocate of encouraging female patients to make sure they get all their concerns addressed, and if necessary, get a second opinion. "You don't know until you know. You have to own it, she said. "That's not just for women, but for men. My job is to make sure that I say, 'Don't stop until you hear an answer, because that's how we end up burying so many women every year. My goal is that every woman knows that their heart is the No. 1 threat."

### MALE PATIENTS WELCOMED

The biggest problem for male patients is that statistically they simply don't go to the doctor enough. Statistics provided by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) states that women are 33% more likely to visit the doctor than men and are 100 percent better at maintaining screening and preventative care. The most frequent cause comes down to traditional views of masculinity. Men don't complain, they don't show weakness and above all, they don't show any fear of dying. Once they make it to an appointment, there is still an inherent fear of talking to a female doctor. But the simple fact is that we all want to live a healthy and productive life for as long as we can, and there are loved ones counting on it. No matter who it is, it's a doctor who truly listens to our problems that can make that happen. "That's when the amazing wives come into play," Alvarez said. "I always establish what we are here for. This is your body. I'm a facilitator and I'm here to provide you with the knowledge and information. None of my male patients ever had any problem telling me how they feel. But you have to create an environment where they're comfortable with you and that's what we do."