

Heart Health: What You Need to Know

Although heart disease is sometimes thought of as a “man’s disease,” it is the leading cause of death for both women and men in the United States, with women comprising 51 percent of the total heart disease deaths.

While heart disease is the number one killer of women, only 13 percent of women in a 2003 survey by the Centers for Disease Control were aware that this is their greatest health problem. Here, the term “heart disease” refers to the broadest category of “diseases of the heart,” which includes acute rheumatic fever, chronic rheumatic heart disease, hypertensive heart disease, coronary heart disease, pulmonary heart disease, congestive heart failure, and any other heart condition or disease.

Studies among people with heart disease have shown that lowering high blood cholesterol and high blood pressure can reduce the risk of dying of heart disease, having a nonfatal heart attack, and needing bypass surgery or angioplasty.

Studies among people without heart disease have shown that lowering high blood cholesterol and high blood pressure can reduce the risk of developing heart disease.

Facts About Women and Heart Disease

Heart disease is often perceived as an “older woman’s disease,” and it is the leading cause of death among women age 65 and older. However, heart disease is the third leading cause of death among women age 25-44 years of age and the second leading cause of death among women aged 45-64 years. Additionally, in 2002, death rates for heart disease were higher among black women than among white women.

There is a range of risk for heart disease depending on family and personal health history and the treatment recommendations from a physician will depend on a woman’s level of risk. Regardless of the risk level, these life style modifications are recommended for all women:

- Cigarette smoking cessation
- 30 minutes physical activity most days
- Heart healthy diet with weight maintenance / reduction.
- Evaluation and treatment of depression

Facts About Heart Failure

■ Heart failure is a condition where the heart cannot pump enough blood and oxygen to meet the needs of other body organs. Heart failure does not mean that the heart has stopped, but that it cannot pump blood the way that it should.

■ Heart failure is a serious condition. There is no cure for heart failure at this time. Once diagnosed, medicines are needed for the rest of the person’s life.

■ The risk of death within five years of being diagnosed with heart failure is more than 50 percent. About 80 percent of men and 70 percent of women with heart failure under the age of 65 die within eight years.

■ People with heart failure are at increased risk for sudden cardiac death.

Source: Center for Disease Control

Women Experience Different Symptoms from Men

Heart attack symptoms in women are often more subtle than those experienced by men. Women are more likely to experience the following symptoms during heart attacks:

- Fatigue
- Anxiety
- Sleep disturbance
- Stomach complaints

Unfortunately, these symptoms are not generally associated with an AMI (acute myocardial infarction). Even members of the medical profession sometimes fail to link these symptoms with heart problems. It is not unusual for a woman's heart attack to be dismissed as anxiety.

Although considered a classic heart attack symptom, chest pain is not commonly experienced by women. Results from a survey of 515 women published in the American Heart Association's journal *Circulation*, revealed some interesting statistics: more than 70 percent of women experienced no chest pain prior to the attack, and as many as 43 percent of women reported no chest pain symptoms during the attack.

Further, women who do experience chest pain may describe the pain as "sharp," rather than "crushing." This description does not match the popular (and traditional medical) perception of heart attack symptoms, and may be misdiagnosed.

Additionally, in the days before the attack, 95 percent of women surveyed reported unusual symptoms; the most common being fatigue, anxiety, and sleep disturbances. This list presents some of the common symptoms experienced by women both prior to and during a heart attack. These symptoms are important to consider in addition to chest pain, since in some women they may be the only symptoms present.

Symptoms Before an Attack

Fatigue (71 percent)
Sleep disturbances (48 percent)
Shortness of breath (42 percent)
Indigestion (39 percent)
Anxiety (35 percent)

Symptoms During an Attack

Shortness of breath (58 percent)
Weakness (55 percent)
Fatigue (43 percent)
"Cold sweat" (39 percent)
Dizziness (39 percent)

Source: NCERx

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