

Women & Heart Health

A Vital Connection

By Karen Rathmell

Like most women, Terry Speiker juggles busy home and work lives. After an especially demanding day at work, she came home exhausted and full of stress. She had a lunch meeting that didn't go well, and she thought something she ate was upsetting her stomach. She just wanted to sleep. She did what a lot of women do when they feel tired and overwhelmed—she took a nice, long bubble bath and went to bed. She's lucky she woke up. Speiker had experienced a heart attack, and like many women, she didn't recognize the symptoms.

In the last few years, since learning that heart attacks occur in almost as many women as men – and since heart disease has become the number one killer of women in the United States – researchers have been studying the difference in heart attack symptoms in women. According to the American Heart Association, the early symptoms of cardiovascular disease in women can be significantly more subtle than in men. And even more dangerous, women often discount or ignore symptoms, attributing them to common conditions like indigestion or stress. Women are being encouraged to take a closer look at the symptoms and risk factors of heart disease, and to speak to their physicians about their heart health.

SYMPTOMS OF HEART DISEASE — FOR WOMEN

If you or any woman you know shows these signs, seek medical attention right away:

- Shortness of breath, often without chest pain of any kind
- Flu-like symptoms — specifically nausea, clamminess or cold sweats
- Unusual or unexplained fatigue, weakness or dizziness
- Pain in the chest, upper back, shoulders, neck or jaw
- Feelings of anxiety, loss of appetite, discomfort

RISK FACTORS

You can be at risk for heart disease if you:

- Smoke
- Are overweight
- Are diabetic
- Have high cholesterol
- Have high blood pressure
- Have a family history of heart disease
- Are not physically active
- Are under stress
- Are postmenopausal

Your risk also increases if you:

- Don't see your doctor regularly
- Don't care for your own medical needs the way you do for others.
- Consider heart disease as a “man's disease.”

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR DOCTOR

It is important to know how heart disease manifests itself in women, and how diagnosis and treatment plans differ according to sex. These questions are provided to encourage a meaningful dialogue between you and your healthcare provider regarding heart disease.

- ✓ What is the difference between heart disease, heart attack and heart failure?
- ✓ What are my risk factors for heart disease?
- ✓ What are the warning signs or symptoms of heart disease?
- ✓ How do warning signs differ for men and women?
- ✓ How will menopause affect my heart?
- ✓ How does smoking affect my heart?
- ✓ Do I need to lose or gain weight for my health?
- ✓ What kind of physical exercise is right for me?
- ✓ What is a healthful eating plan for me?
- ✓ What is the difference between good and bad cholesterol and what should my levels be?
- ✓ Based on my history and risk factors what can I do to lower my risk of heart disease?
- ✓ What kinds of tests are used to diagnose heart disease?
- ✓ Which ones are most appropriate for women?
- ✓ What are some of the available treatments for heart disease for my condition?

Note: Individual symptoms, situations, and circumstances may vary. Please consult your physician or qualified healthcare provider regarding your condition and appropriate medical treatment. The information provided is not intended to be used for medical diagnosis or treatment, or as a substitute for professional medical advice.

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