

What You Should Know About Recognizing and Preventing Heart Attacks

If you were having a heart attack, would you realize what was happening? Most women picture a heart attack in progress as a man clutching his chest in pain. However, researchers have found that women's heart attack symptoms often differ from those of men. Here's how you can recognize a heart attack and, more importantly, lessen the likelihood that it will happen to you.

Women's Heart Disease Symptoms

Women may worry more about cancer than heart disease, but coronary heart disease (CHD)—blockage of the arteries that supply blood to the heart—is the leading cause of death in women. Heart disease affects one out of every three women, and deaths from unsuspected heart problems have increased in young women aged 35 to 44 years. Almost seven in 10 women who suddenly died of heart disease had never been diagnosed with CHD.

Unfortunately, when women have heart attacks they fare worse than men. Women are twice as likely to die from their first heart attack, or to have a second attack, or to become disabled from its aftereffects. Perhaps one reason women don't do as well

as men is that their symptoms of heart disease are so different from men's that they and their health care providers don't realize they are suffering from CHD.

Some new studies are shedding light on symptoms that should cue women and their health care providers to consider CHD. It seems that the classic symptom of heart disease—pain on the left side of the chest, sometimes going down the left arm or up to the jaw—is either not what most women feel, or not what they describe as feeling. Instead, in a number of studies, seven out of every 10 women who had a heart attack reported unexplained fatigue in the days prior to the attack. The fatigue was unusual, different than the tiredness due to missed sleep or stressful life events, and overwhelming, making even small daily activities like bedstraightening difficult.

Other common symptoms preceding heart attacks included shortness of breath with activity, frequent indigestion, and feelings of anxiety. Only three out of 10 women reported feeling chest discomfort, and they did not describe it as pain: aching, tightness, and pressure were the most commonly used terms.

If you have these symptoms, especially if you have one or more of the risk factors described below, you should see your health care provider right away. Many women in the studies who sought medical attention felt their health care provider wasn't listening to them or taking them seriously. Tell your health care provider you're specifically concerned about heart disease and you know that women's symptoms may differ from men's. If you have sudden onset of disabling, unexplained fatigue, especially with chest pain, pressure, "indigestion," and shortness of breath, call your local emergency system (911 in many areas) immediately. If you are having a heart attack, early medical care is the key to preventing heart damage.

Heart Disease Risk Factors: Control The Ones You Can

Recognizing symptoms of CHD is important, but it's putting the cart before the horse. Preventing CHD is equally, if not more, important. Certain conditions—called risk factors—in your and your family's health history, along with your life-style and current health status, make CHD more or less likely. Some risk factors you can change; others cannot be altered. You can check your risk of heart disease with The American Heart Association's risk calculator, which is available at: <http://www.americanheart.org> But remember, nothing is 100% predictable. Some women with many risk factors never have heart attacks, and some women with no risk factors do.

This Patient Handout was prepared by Diane E. Judge, APN, CNP, using information from McSweeney JC, et al. Recognizing Prodromal Symptoms in Women at Risk for Coronary Heart Disease (The Female Patient. 2004;29(8): 10-14); the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (www.nhlbi.nih.gov); and the National Women's Health Information Center (www.4woman.gov).

Recognizing and Preventing Heart Attacks

Coronary heart disease is more common in women with the following unchangeable risk factors:

Family History.—close family members (mother, father, brothers, sisters) who had heart attacks, especially at an early age.

Age.—past the age of menopause (on average, about age 51 years).

Race.—blacks have a higher risk of heart disease than whites, Hispanics, and Asians.

From the standpoint of prevention, the many risk factors for heart disease that you can prevent or control are more important.

Prevent Or Control High Blood Pressure And Diabetes

You are least likely to develop CHD if you keep your blood pressure below 120/80 mm Hg. Get your blood pressure checked regularly. If it's normal, do what you can to help keep it that way: maintain a normal weight, eat a healthful diet, and exercise regularly. If it's high, work with your health care provider to control it with medication.

Women who have diabetes are far more likely than those without diabetes to have heart attacks, but good diabetes control lowers the risk. If you have diabetes, take advantage of all the available tools, medications, and life-style changes to keep it under good control. Your health care provider may also suggest a medication called a "statin," usually used to treat high cholesterol, which seems to lower heart attack risk in people with diabetes even if they have normal cholesterol levels.

To prevent diabetes, try to keep your weight in a normal range. Also, get a blood test for diabetes annually over the age of 40 years, or younger if you are overweight, have a family history of diabetes, or had diabetes during pregnancy.

Stop Smoking

You already know that smoking increases the risk for serious, life-threatening diseases. It's time to quit. Write down 10 ways that quitting smoking will benefit you, and read them every day. Set a quit date.

When that date comes, throw away all cigarettes, lighters, matches, ash-trays and anything else that goes along with smoking. You can get help from your health care provider, local hospitals and clinics, or local chapters of the American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, or American Lung Association, or online at <http://www.womenshealth.gov>.

Control Your Cholesterol

If you haven't been checked, request a cholesterol test from your health care provider. The test should be done while fasting, so don't eat anything for 12 hours beforehand. You should receive information about your total cholesterol level, LDL ("bad" cholesterol), triglycerides, and HDL ("good" cholesterol). High total cholesterol and LDL increase CHD risk; high HDL lowers it. Although some women inherit a tendency to have high cholesterol, most women can decrease their total and LDL cholesterol and triglycerides, and raise their HDL with diet and exercise. Read food labels and stay away from high-fat items such as fried foods, whole milk, cheese, butter, and processed foods with a high saturated fat content. Substitute baked, broiled, or boiled meats, fish, and non-fat milk, yogurt, and cottage cheese. Eating a small handful of walnuts, peanuts, almonds, or cashews daily seems to help protect your heart. Eating fish twice a week and exercising also can help increase your HDL.

If diet and exercise don't work, medications can. For more information, check <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/cholesterol/what.htm>.

Resources

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute Heart Truth Campaign
<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/>

Office on Women's Health, DHHS National Women's Health Information Center
<http://www.womenshealth.gov>
1-800-994-9662
TDD: 1-888-220-5446

Watch Your Weight And Exercise Regularly

Body Mass Index (BMI) is a way of using your height and weight to find out if your weight is in the healthy range. You can find a BMI calculator at <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/calc-bmi.htm>, or calculate it by hand using these steps: (1) multiply your height in inches by your height in inches, (2) divide your weight in pounds by the result of #1, (3) multiply this result by 703. If the answer is more than 25, you need to lose weight. You can get weight loss suggestions from your health care provider, or at <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity/resources.htm>.

Exercising daily or almost daily for 30 minutes or more helps with weight loss, improves mood, increases HDL, and decreases CHD risk. Fit some kind of exercise into your life—walking to work, school, or on errands, running, biking, going to the gym. Do it one day at a time until you're in the habit.

In Summary

It's important to recognize the symptoms of heart disease and heart attack, but equally important to do what you can to prevent CHD. And there's no time like the present to get started.