

Women & Heart Disease

BY JUDITH LENANE, RN, MHA, MEDICAL CENTER OF AURORA

June (whose name has been changed), a 44-year-old professional woman, was feeling fatigued, fatigued enough that she went to see her physician. She was told she was dehydrated and anemic, given a prescription for iron, and told to drink a fluid-replacement drink. The next day she was still very tired and just not feeling right. The third day June took her son to the airport, returned home, and “felt like she was going to die.” She called her physician and was told to call 9-1-1 immediately. June had been having a heart attack, but neither she nor her physician recognized the symptoms, which are different in men than women.

Both women and physicians often attribute women’s chest pain to non-cardiac causes, leading to delays in treatment like June’s. It’s important for all of us to realize the severity

of heart disease in women and what you can do to prevent it.

The facts on women and heart disease:

Heart disease is the number one killer of Americans, and is more prevalent in women than men. In fact, of the 2.4 million Americans who die each

year, 39 percent of them die from heart disease. Women are developing heart disease at a much earlier and much faster rate than ever before. And heart disease has no quick fix.

Even if a special procedure, like an angioplasty, is performed, heart disease will worsen unless lifestyle changes are made and possibly medications are taken.

Symptoms of heart disease vary from person to person, making it difficult to detect. Some people have no symptoms at all, they simply die suddenly.

Odds are, you are more likely to die of heart disease than your husband.

Startling Facts

A few startling facts about women and heart disease:

- 63% of women who died suddenly from heart disease had no previous symptoms.
- Women have heart disease more than men, but receive only 35% of all cardiovascular care.
- 38% of women who suffer a heart attack will die within one year, compared to 25% of men.
- One in 2.5 women will die of heart disease or stroke.
- 13% of women aged 45 and over have had a heart attack.
- Women receive less aggressive treatment than men.
- Most medical therapies are tested on middle-aged men, not women.
- Heart disease in women is happening at much younger ages and at a much faster rate.

SYMPTOMS OF HEART DISEASE ARE DIFFERENT

IN WOMEN THAN MEN Women’s symptoms are more vague and are often described as “atypical.”

Typical symptoms of a heart attack can include chest discomfort, which is usually in the center of the chest. Discomfort usually lasts for more than a few minutes, or goes away and comes back. Other symptoms are an uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, or fullness in the chest area. Men usually experience these typical symptoms, and some women do, too.

Atypical (women’s) symptoms of a heart attack may include one or more of the following: pain or discomfort in other areas of the upper body, including one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw, or stomach; shortness of breath; breaking out in a cold sweat; nausea, fatigue, or light-headedness; or the feeling that something is dreadfully wrong.

If you do experience symptoms, call 9-1-1 right away. Don’t wait! Don’t drive yourself to the hospital, either. Trust your instincts and don’t minimize your feelings. It’s normal to feel uncertain, you haven’t experienced this before, and you may not want to jump to conclusions or inconvenience anyone. But you owe it to yourself to take action fast. And finally, don’t be embarrassed by a false alarm, it’s better to be wrong than dead. When you are having a heart attack, time is muscle. For every minute you have a blocked artery, the heart muscle below the blockage is dying. Unlike what you see in the movies or on ER, most heart attacks start slowly, with only mild pain or discomfort.

ARE WOMEN SUDDENLY DEVELOPING HEART DISEASE?

No, women have had heart disease for a long time. In fact, in 1908 heart disease became the number one killer of women.

(Coincidentally, it was also the first year we recognized our mothers by celebrating Mother’s Day.) Women do, however, tend to delay seeking health care. As caregivers, women often take care of everyone in their household first, even their pets, before they take care of themselves. This, along with lack of education, contributes to the under-diagnosis of heart disease in women.

RISK FACTORS ARE BEHAVIORS OR CONDITIONS THAT INCREASE YOUR CHANCE OF DEVELOPING HEART DISEASE

If you have more than one risk factor for heart disease, you should make changes to your lifestyle to reduce your risk. You don’t have to make radical changes all at once, but making small, gradual changes will lead to big improvements in the long run. Get help from your health care provider, family, and friends to make positive lifestyle changes in your health. Risk factors have a multiplying effect. This means that having more than one risk factor increases your odds of developing heart disease.

If you were to compare a standard American from 1960 to 2000, you’d find they are 25 pounds heavier, exercise less, have higher cholesterol, and eat larger portions of food.

Risk factors that you cannot control: Family history of early heart disease; Age: women 55 or older; men 45 or older.

Risk factors that you can control: Smoking; High blood pressure; High blood cholesterol; Being overweight or obese; Physical inactivity; Diabetes ; Stress.

Research shows that more than 95 percent of those who die from heart disease have at least one of these risk factors. Many times, all that’s needed is a lifestyle change. In fact, you can lower your risk of heart disease risk up to 82 percent just by leading a healthy lifestyle.

Know Your Numbers

- Blood Pressure:
 - Goal: 120/80v
 - Diabetics: 130/80
- Smoking –stop now
- Blood Cholesterol
 - Total cholesterol: below 200
 - HDL (good): women above 50, men above 40
 - LDL: below 100
 - Triglycerides: below 150
- Waist circumference: Women greater than 35 inches and men greater than 40 inches have a higher risk of heart disease
- Body Mass Index (BMI): charts your height and weight into scores
 - Normal Weight: 18.5 - 24.9
 - Overweight: 25-29.9
 - Obese: Greater than 30

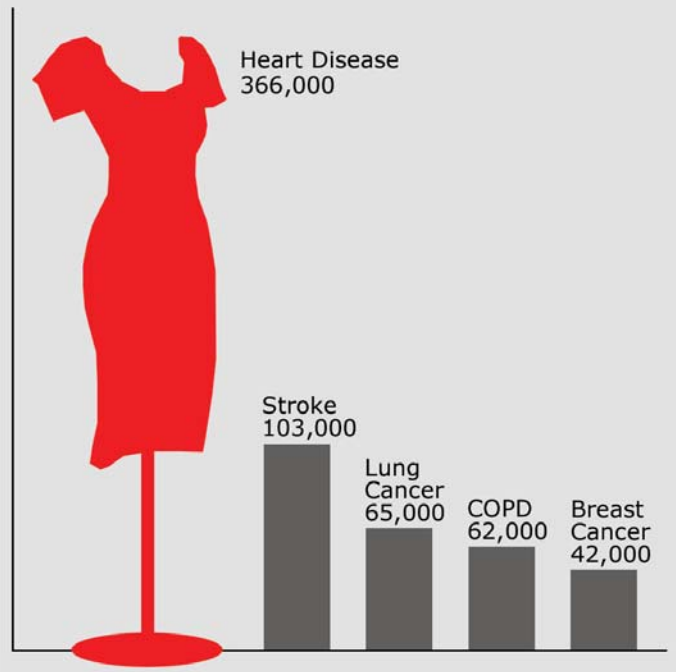
THE TEEN YEARS A sharp drop in physical activity levels occurs when girls become teenagers. About 14 percent of young women are not physically active. About 80 percent of smokers begin before age 18, and approximately 30 percent of girls in grades 9-12 reported using tobacco in 2001. About 15 percent of girls ages 6-19 are overweight—an alarming trend in America. Almost one-third of young people ages 10-19 have blood cholesterol levels that are too high. Weight gain beginning in childhood can lead to an enlarged heart by early adulthood. The percentage of children and adolescents who are defined as overweight has more than doubled since the early 1970s.

MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN Until recently, taking hormone therapy with estrogen alone or estrogen plus progestin was thought to help protect women against heart disease. But a study from the Women's Health Initiative showed that taking estrogen plus progestin poses more risks than benefits. Each year, about 88,000 women ages 45-64 have a heart attack. Heart disease rates are 2-3 times higher for postmenopausal women than for those of the same age who have not yet undergone menopause. At age 45, more women than men have a total cholesterol over 200 md/dl, which is high. The lifetime risk of developing high blood pressure for women over age 55 is about 90 percent. At age 45, over 50 percent of women have high blood pressure.

OLDER WOMEN Most women over age 65 have obvious heart disease or hardening of the arteries. Every year, about 372,000 women age 65 or older have a heart attack. Of every five deaths from stroke, two are men and three are women. Women make up 75 percent of all nursing home residents over the age of 75. In 2000, there were approximately one million Americans with a diagnosis of stroke. Of those, 74 percent were 65 or older.

COMPARING HEART DISEASE TO OTHER WOMEN'S DISEASES Heart disease is the leading cause of death in American women today, but unfortunately less than 50 percent of women know this important fact. In addition to killing you, heart disease can also lead to disability and a significantly decreased quality of life. Heart disease claims more women's lives than the next seven causes of death combined, nearly 500,000 a year, almost twice as many as all forms of cancer combined.

Leading Causes of Death for American Women



PREVENTION Your lifelong behaviors and choices all contribute to whether you acquire heart disease or not. Since heart disease is a progressive disease that starts in your teen years, what you eat, how much you exercise, and whether you smoke all play an important role. Many health care professionals believe a heart disease crisis is developing in this country because of the dramatic increase in teen obesity. Our society has also seen a higher incidence of smoking, lack of consistent exercise, and poor overall health in women today. There are several steps you can take to reduce your risk of developing heart disease.

The first step is to have a “heart-to-heart” talk with your physician. Learn your personal risks, draw up a list of questions prior to your visit, and take notes during your talk. It's important to tell your doctor the truth about your lifestyle behaviors and to inform your doctor of any symptoms you feel. The next step is to learn your numbers: know your blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and your BMI (body mass index). Keeping your waist circumference less than 35 inches (40 inches for men) also helps reduce your risk of developing heart disease. If you smoke, stop now. And finally, help your children create healthy behaviors during the early stages of their life.

The best advice to give women is to be your own advocate. Ask questions and look for information on heart disease. Set realistic goals for yourself, replace unhealthy habits with healthier ones, and begin today. For more information on women and heart disease visit, <http://womenshearthealth.auroramed.com>. ■

About the author

Judith Lenane, RN, MHA, a popular speaker on heart health issues and cardiac risk assessment, is director of the cardiovascular department at The Medical Center of Aurora in Colorado. One of the founders of American Cardiology Care and LifeWatch, she has over 24 years of cardiovascular experience. Judith also worked for 10 years at the Washington Hospital Center in Washington, D.C. Judith can be reached at Judith.Lenane@HealthONEcares.com.