



The heart truth about women and heart attack

by Donella Young, MD, North Basin Medical Clinics



Your heart is a good barometer of emotion. It tells you when you're hurt, afraid or in love, but will it tell you when you're having a heart attack? If you're a woman, it may not.

Recent studies show that men and women may have very different symptoms when it comes to heart attack. Many women in the early stages of a heart attack don't even recognize the signs – and for good reason.

For years, we've been told about the classic symptoms of a heart attack – heavy chest pain that radiates down the left arm and to the neck and jaw. I like to call it the "elephant sitting on your chest." Unfortunately, that particular symptom is more likely to occur in men. Most medical studies on heart attack have been performed on men – until now.

A recent study of women and heart disease shows that women are more prone to have atypical heart attacks – ones where the symptoms don't seem to equate to a heart attack. These signs are often mild and may or may not accompany chest pain. They include...

- Sudden onset of weakness, body aches and overall feeling of illness
- A burning sensation in the chest, often mistaken as heartburn
- An "unusual" feeling or mild discomfort in the chest or back

Because these symptoms don't add up to that classic "elephant on the chest," many women, and sometimes their doctors, fail to recognize them -- often with tragic results.

Heart disease is the number one killer of women. In fact, one in three American women dies of heart disease. So why isn't more being done to prevent it? Partly because women, themselves need to take more initiative.

The vast majority of women are more afraid of breast cancer than heart disease. Although the threat of breast cancer is very real and I, along with my colleagues, see the need for regular mammograms and annual exams, we women need to broaden our focus. We need to deal with our overall health – including our cardiovascular system.

Smoking, poor diet, high stress levels, being overweight and sedentary lifestyle can eventually catch up to us all. The results can be high blood pressure, diabetes, stroke or heart disease.

So, what's the first step to taking back our cardiovascular health? Information.

Get your blood tested. Know your cholesterol, triglycerides and blood sugar levels. Have your blood pressure taken. Find out what those numbers mean, then take the following steps to prevent cardiovascular disease. Stop smoking. Eat a healthy diet. Exercise. Lose weight if needed. Lower your stress level. An interesting note here is that women typically report emotional stress prior to having their heart attack. Men typically report physical exertion prior to heart attack.

Talk to your healthcare provider. Work with them to understand cardiovascular health and make a prevention plan. It's better to prevent a heart attack than to deal with the damage after. Listen to your heart – it can tell you a lot when you understand what it's trying to tell you.

Typical Heart Attack Symptoms in Both Genders

- Pain, pressure, squeezing sensation or stabbing pain in the chest
- Pain radiating to shoulder, neck, back, arm or jaw
- Pounding heart or change in heart rhythm
- Difficulty breathing
- Nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain
- Cold sweats or clammy skin
- Dizziness
- Feeling of anxiety, panic or doom
- Heartburn

Heart Attack Symptoms Typical in Women

(often mild and with no accompanying chest pain)

- Sudden onset of weakness, body aches, overall feeling of illness
- A burning sensation in the chest, often mistaken for heartburn
- An "unusual" feeling of mild discomfort in the chest or back

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