



The truth about women and heart attacks

For a very long time, many people—both men and women, and even many people in health care—considered heart attack a health risk mostly for men. Information about heart attacks typically showed only images of men, and heart disease research focused on men.

The truth, however, is much different. Heart attack is the number-one killer for both men and women in the United States—and it affects women of all ages and ethnicities. If you're a woman, it's very important that you learn about your risk for heart attack and the differences between the way men and women experience heart attack.

Here are some startling statistics from the American Heart Association about women and cardiovascular disease (which includes heart disease):

- Heart disease is the number-one killer of women, causing 1 in 3 deaths each year. That's approximately one woman every minute.
- Fewer women than men survive their first heart attack.
- Women age 55 and younger who have a heart attack may have more physical problems than men do after a heart attack.

- 90% of women have one or more risk factors for heart disease or stroke.
- Hispanic women are likely to develop heart disease 10 years earlier than Caucasian women.
- 48.3% of African-American women ages 20 and older have cardiovascular disease—yet only 14% believe cardiovascular disease is their greatest health problem.

Symptoms of heart attacks in women

Another factor that can make it more difficult for women to realize they're experiencing a heart attack is that the symptoms are often more subtle—less obvious—than they are in men. When many of us think about heart attack, we usually picture a sudden, sharp pain that causes the person to clutch their chest and fall to the ground, or extreme pressure, like an elephant sitting on the person's chest.

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Common Symptoms in Women

Lightheadedness

You may feel dizzy or feel like you might pass out.

Shortness of Breath

You may pant for breath or try to take deep breaths.

Upper Body Pain

Radiating pain in the left or both arms, upper back, neck or jaw.

Stomach Pain

Pain may extend downward into abdominal area and may feel like heartburn.

Nausea and Vomiting

You may feel sick to your stomach or vomit.



Sweating

Paleness or you may suddenly break into a sweat with cold, clammy skin.

Inability to Sleep

You may experience insomnia.

Unusual Fatigue

You may feel more tired than usual or for no apparent reason.

Possible Chest Discomfort

It may last more than a few minutes or goes away and returns.

Every person is unique and can experience the signs and symptoms of a heart attack differently. People may experience only one or two symptoms, may experience multiple symptoms at different times and can have symptoms over a period of time.

While these two symptoms are common in heart attacks in general, they don't show up as often in heart attacks that happen to women.

Instead, women often experience some of the other signs of heart attack, including:

- Shortness of breath
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Pain in the back and/or jaw
- Pressure or pain in the lower chest or upper abdomen
- Dizziness, lightheadedness and/or fainting
- Extreme fatigue

Be aware—and take action!

The danger in these more subtle symptoms of heart attack is that women all too often ignore them, or they think they're caused by

something less dangerous, such as acid reflux, the flu or their busy lifestyle. As a result, they may wait for hours before getting medical help—or they may not get help at all.

Remember this: Time is muscle. The longer you wait to get help after a heart attack, the greater your risk for long-term health issues or even death.

The best heart attack, of course, is the one that never happens. Make it a point to talk with your doctor about your risks for heart attack and the lifestyle changes you can make to lower those risks.

If you're experiencing the signs of a heart attack, call 911 immediately!

Do not call your doctor, the hospital, or a friend or family member.