

Heart Health – A Woman’s Issue Too!

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February is designated as National Heart Month and “Go Red” month for women. “Go Red” is the American Heart Association’s (AHA) way to promote heart health for women and its symbol is a red dress. For decades, it was thought that women did not have the same high risk for heart disease as men, but unfortunately, equality has been achieved in this area. Women’s risk of heart disease is lower than men’s through most of their life until they reach their 60’s. By age 65, women actually have a higher risk of heart attack than men and have more difficulty recovering from the attacks.

To the credit of the American Cancer Society and the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, breast health promotion is impressive. Women have indeed gotten the message that breast health must be a priority. What most women don’t realize is that one in 2.5 women will die of heart disease or stroke compared with one in 30 for breast cancer. Heart health in women has been neglected in many ways. While heart disease in women has been underfunded, understudied, underdiagnosed and undertreated, this trend is slowly changing. Here are 5 facts about heart disease that women (and men in their life) should know:

1. Heart disease is the most important issue in women’s health. The medical community is trying to undo all the misinformation and neglect that has taken place over the last few decades regarding women and heart disease. An AHA survey showed that only 55% of US women knew that heart disease was their leading cause of death.
2. Women have subtler symptoms. Women’s and men’s symptoms can differ substantially. Women’s symptoms tend to be much more ambiguous requiring a very suspicious health-care provider to identify the seriousness of the symptoms. In a study of more than 500 women who had suffered a heart attack, the most frequent symptom reported was unusual fatigue followed by difficulty sleeping, shortness of breath or indigestion, and anxiety. Men’s symptoms tend to focus on chest tightness or heaviness.
3. Heart disease in women may affect small vessels rather than large arteries as it does in men. Groundbreaking results were announced this year from the Women’s Ischemia Syndrome Evaluation (WISE). This was the first study where just women (more than 1,000) with chest pain, all of whom had undergone an angiography, were studied for 5 years. The average age was 58 and only 1/3 had an obvious blockage in their coronary artery system. The other two-thirds were considered to have “clear” arteries. Instead of obvious blockages of plaque from cholesterol, many women are prone to plaque building up in smaller vessels or the branches of the arteries. This can escape detection in the “gold standard” angiogram testing. Small vessel blockage is called Coronary Microvascular Disease.
4. Heart health tests may be less accurate in women. Not just angiograms but treadmill stress tests are less reliable. Tests that monitor the electrical activity of the heart or EKG’s are often inaccurate in women. Tests that include pictures of the heart using ultrasound (stress electrocardiograms) or radioactive dye (nuclear stress tests) are much more reliable. Monitoring good cholesterol or HDL and C-Reactive Protein (CRP—a measure of inflammation) may be of more value for women also.

5. Women may not receive the appropriate health care after diagnosis. Appropriate medications, cardiac rehabilitation referral or referral for other heart procedures like angioplasty, stents or bypass surgery are less likely to happen for women than men. This is where women need to be strong advocates for their health care. If you have a history of heart disease in your family or other risk factors, be very proactive in seeking the health care you need. Know and assess your ABC's which are as follows:
- a) A1c – A blood test reflecting your body's ability to process sugar.
 - b) Blood pressure
 - c) Cholesterol numbers and CRP
 - d) Diet – Are you consuming a heart-healthy, well-balanced diet?
 - e) Emotional status – Women over 60 are more likely to suffer “broken heart” syndrome, which is temporary heart failure due to emotional stress.

Classic Heart Attack Symptoms

- Tightness or chest pressure
- Squeezing or center chest pain
- Recurring chest discomfort
- Pain spreading to the neck, arms or jaw
- Shortness of breath
- Sweating; clammy skin or paleness
- Nausea or lightheadedness

More Likely Symptoms for Women

- Unusual fatigue or weakness
- New, unusual shortness of breath during everyday activities
- Dizziness or nausea
- Discomfort between shoulder blades
- Back pain or upper chest discomfort
- Indigestion or mild heartburn
- Sense of doom or anxiety
- Racing heartbeats (palpitations) or feeling extra heartbeats
- Flu-like symptoms, including chills and cold sweats

Bottom line, both genders need to pay attention to the warning signs of heart disease and be proactive in caring for their heart health. More information and heart-healthy recipes can be found on: www.americanheart.org. For a quick and easy heart-healthy snack try any variety of hummus and serve with whole grain crackers, whole wheat pita bread, or fresh veggies. One-fourth cup of hummus has approximately 110 calories, 7 grams of fiber, 5 grams of protein and 6 grams of good fats needed for heart health.

**Information taken from Dr. Andrew Weil's "Self Healing" December 2006 Issue*