The Heart of a Woman: Women and Heart Disease

Luanda Grazette MD, MPH, FACC
Associate Professor of Medicine
Fellowship Director Advanced Heart Failure and Transplantation
Director Advanced Heart Failure and Cardiomyopathy
Keck Medical School of the University of Southern California
Heart disease claims the lives of 1 out of 3 women in the U.S. each year.

- Heart disease is the No. 1 cause of death in American women
- Half of American women are unaware of this
- While deaths related to coronary artery disease (CAD) declining overall, rates are increasing in young women.
Putting things in Perspective

To put in to context more women die of heart disease than all cancers combined
• An estimated 44 million women in the U.S. are affected by cardiovascular diseases.
• 90% of women have one or more risk factors for heart disease or stroke.
• Women have a higher lifetime risk of stroke than men.
• Fewer women than men survive their first heart attack
Why is that so surprising to us?

The typical heart patient

a “keen and ambitious man, the indicator of whose engine is always ‘full speed ahead’”—a “well ‘set’ man from 45-55 years of age, with a military bearing, iron-gray hair, and a florid complexion.”

Sir William Osler MD, 1849-1919

1982 Multiple Risk Factor Intervention Trial, one of the first to establish a link between cholesterol and heart disease, involved 12,866 men, 0 women

1995 Physicians’ Health Study, which found aspirin to reduce the risk of heart attack, involved 22,071 men, 0 women
What does a woman having a heart attack look like?
What does a woman having a heart attack look like?
What does woman look like having a heart attack
What we should be aware of

- Women are just as likely as men to develop CAD.
- In women, CAD usually develops seven to 10 years later in life compared with men. Menopause seems to kick off a host of risk factors including:
  - weight gain, especially carrying excess fat around your waist or midsection
  - diabetes, which is the strongest risk factor in women; in fact, studies suggest diabetes more than triples the risk of CAD in women, compared with doubling the risk for men
  - high blood pressure
  - change in cholesterol profile (rise in LDL and triglycerides, fall in HDL)
- Are more likely to have “false negative” stress tests although blood flow to the heart is reduced
- Women may have blockages or dysfunction in smaller arteries (men are more likely to have plaque buildup in the large arteries around the heart)
- Women tend to be treated less aggressively than men
- Women are less likely to dial 911
What we should be aware of; Women tend to have different and more subtle symptoms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEN EXPERIENCE</th>
<th>WOMEN EXPERIENCE</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chest pain or discomfort</td>
<td>Back, neck or jaw pain or tightness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shortness of breath</td>
<td>Burning sensation in the chest, similar to heartburn</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nausea</td>
<td>Chest discomfort</td>
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<td>Dizziness</td>
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<td>Vomiting</td>
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<td>Sweating</td>
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**ME!**
What we should be aware of; risks

**Risks specific to women**

- Pregnancy can be seen as nature’s stress test on the heart. Pregnancy may bring about temporary spikes in blood pressure (gestational hypertension or preeclampsia) or blood sugar levels (gestational diabetes).
  - Gestational hypertension/preeclampsia — Any elevation in blood pressure increases the risk for heart disease in women can double the risk of future heart attack or stroke.
  - Gestational diabetes during any pregnancy.
  - Preterm delivery (before 37 weeks of gestation).

- Breast cancer, receiving radiation therapies and certain type of chemotherapies can increase the risk of developing heart disease later in life.

- Having started menstruating before 10 or after 17 years of age.

- Polycystic ovarian syndrome.

**Women are also more likely to have less common conditions linked to CAD. These include:**

- Heart disease affecting the smaller arteries supplying the heart (microvascular): These are typically due to microvascular endothelial dysfunction of the arteries and not complete blockages. Standard tests aren’t designed to diagnose this.

- Spontaneous coronary artery dissection (SCAD).

- Autoimmune diseases, such as lupus (SLE) or rheumatoid arthritis (RA).

- Broken heart syndrome, also called Takotsubo Syndrome or stress cardiomyopathy: Despite the name, it can occur with good or bad emotional excitement.
What we can do

1. Take stock of your heart disease risk. Be aware of your risk factors! If you are approaching menopause or have had a pregnancy with a preterm delivery, gestational hypertension/preeclampsia or gestational diabetes, ask how these events can affect your chance of having heart problems in the future.

2. Schedule routine health checkups. Know your numbers: your weight, body mass index (BMI), waist measurement, blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol levels. Are they under control or within a healthy range?

3. Start or step up your exercise program. Aim to get 30-45 minutes of exercise most days. Pick activities that get your heart pumping and that you enjoy. Walking, riding a bike, swimming—even gardening or heavy housework—count. Talk with your health care provider about what exercise routine is best for you.

4. Maintain a healthy weight. Ask your provider what that number is, and pay attention to the fat around your waist. People with more of an apple-shaped body and too much fat around their waists appear to be at higher risk of serious heart issues. Know your BMI and waist circumference.

5. Eat a healthy diet. Make healthy food choices every day. Learn which foods have hidden fats, empty calories and added sugars. The Mediterranean and the DASH diets are two examples of heart-healthy plans.

6. Quit or don’t start smoking. That includes vaping. Ask your doctor for information to help you quit smoking.

7. Reduce your stress. Mindfulness, music, yoga, the beach etc.

8. Get enough sleep. Insufficient sleep is bad for the heart—not to mention for your overall health.

9. Listen to your body. If you have a feeling that something is wrong, get it checked out. If you think you are having a heart attack, call 911. Early diagnosis and treatment are critical, and may even save your life!
Resources

• WomenHeart
  www.womenheart.org

• Mended Hearts

To connect with a Mended Hearts representative contact the national office at 1-888-432-7899 or info@mendedhearts.org.

• WISEWOMEN
  https://www.cdc.gov/wisewoman/

• The American Heart Association – Go Red for Women
  www.goredforwomen.org
Questions

MOM
- I'm hungry
- Where is my shirt?
- Is dinner ready yet?
- I can't find my...
- I'm cold

DAD
- Where's Mom?