

Heart Health in Women

A Closer Look

By Jenna Haines

EXPERT ADVICE

Heart Disease in Women

In addition to traditional risk factors, women should be aware of certain risk factors that often play more of a role in the development of heart disease for women than they do for men. For example, metabolic syndrome has a greater impact on a woman's risk for heart disease than a man's. Mental stress and depression affect women's hearts more than men's, as does smoking. Another important factor is low levels of estrogen after menopause, which can lead to the development of small vessel heart disease.

SOURCE: Mayo Clinic



The Dangers and the Symptoms

According to the American Heart Association, heart disease is the No. 1 killer of women in the United States. Unfortunately, because many women are never told about gender differences in symptoms, they don't always know when they are experiencing a cardiac event. For instance, women frequently do not experience the "elephant on your chest" sensation stereotypical of a heart attack. Rather, they may feel like they are having a bout of the flu or heartburn. Or, instead of the giveaway symptom—chest pain—many women experience symptoms like shortness of breath, dizziness, extreme fatigue, and nausea.

The Importance of Lifestyle and Nutrition

While gender can be an important factor in recognizing heart attack symptoms, the "big seven" heart health risk factors are not gender-

specific. These include: smoking, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, obesity, family history and older age.

That's not to say that there aren't risk factors women should be particularly attuned to.

For example, Harvard Health says that, for women, a low level of "good" HDL cholesterol (below 50 milligrams per deciliter) is more of a problem than a high level of "bad" LDL cholesterol. Also, while women under 55 tend to have lower blood pressure levels than men, the tables turn after that point, and women's blood pressure often skyrocket.

So how can you avoid a heart catastrophe?

Lower your salt and sugar intake, watch your weight and cholesterol, and be wary of the telltale signs of a heart attack. If you're not sure, just call 911. As the saying goes, it's better to be safe than sorry. ♀

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