

Health & Wellness News

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The Heart of a Woman

Ask a woman what her biggest health concern is, and the first answer is usually breast cancer. While breast and other forms of cancer are certainly worthy of concern, in actuality, heart disease is the leading cause of death for women in this country. According to the American Heart Association, heart disease and heart attacks kill about 460,000 women annually—nearly twice as many women as all forms of cancer *combined*.

It's a grim statistic, but it doesn't have to be.

Classic Heart Attack Symptoms

Chest discomfort Most heart attacks involve discomfort in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes, or that goes away and comes back. It can feel like uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain.

Discomfort in other areas of the upper body Symptoms can include pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach.

Shortness of breath with or without chest discomfort.

Other signs may include breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea or lightheadedness.

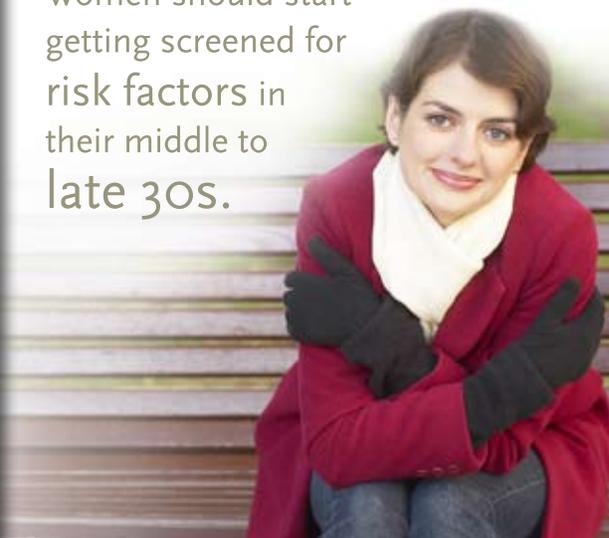
As with men, women's most common heart attack symptom is chest pain or discomfort. But women are somewhat more likely than men to experience some of the other common symptoms, particularly shortness of breath, nausea/vomiting, and back or jaw pain.

Even if you're not sure you're having a heart attack, have your symptoms evaluated. **Fast action saves lives. Don't wait to call 9-1-1 if you suspect you are having a heart attack.**

Understanding the Gender Difference

If you are fortunate enough not to have had a heart attack, you may still think that the only symptom is the sudden, chest-crushing experience that we all see in movies. And while these types of heart attacks do occur, many heart attacks come on gradually, with more subtle symptoms that, unfortunately, can be easily misinterpreted.

Women should start getting screened for risk factors in their middle to late 30s.



“One big difference between women and men is that while both genders may experience symptoms as a result of stress, women tend to experience symptoms related to emotional stress more frequently,” explains Jennifer M. Collins, MD, a cardiologist at Lahey’s Heart and Vascular Center. “Women may have symptoms such as increased fatigue, jaw and neck pain and shortness of breath...which are harder to interpret. But any time you suspect you might be having a heart attack, you should call 911 immediately.”

Collins also notes that women’s symptoms are often misdiagnosed, or labeled as anxiety or panic by the medical community. “Unfortunately, studies have shown that men’s symptoms tend to be taken more seriously by many physicians, and that men are screened for risk factors more frequently and treated more aggressively.

“This can be very confusing and frustrating for women,” admits Collins. “But the more you know, the more empowered you become, the more you can do to protect yourself from heart disease and heart attack.”

Understanding Your Risk for Heart Disease

Heart disease is a condition characterized by a narrowing of the coronary arteries that can block the supply of blood to the heart. The arteries narrow due to a buildup of plaque or fatty substances in their walls. This process typically develops gradually, over many years. Sometimes this plaque can break open and lead to the formation of a blood clot. If this blood clot suddenly cuts off most or all of the blood supply to the heart, a heart attack results.

“Heart disease is a silent killer,” explains Collins. “Most of the symptoms are silent, so earlier and thorough screenings can make a big difference.”

The top risk factors for cardiovascular disease include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, smoking, obesity, diabetes, family history and advanced age.

“Quitting smoking can greatly reduce your risk of having a heart attack.”



Cardiothoracic Surgeon Christina Williamson, MD, and Cardiologist Jennifer Collins, MD

Collins suggests that women start getting screened for risk factors in their mid to late 30s. “This is a time when women are very busy, have children, are perhaps working, too. If they feel well, they assume they’re fine. But again, they very well could have silent medical issues. Heart disease typically develops in your 40s and 50s, and unfortunately, we’ve seen that the older you are when you have a heart attack, the more difficult it is to recover. This is why catching and controlling risk factors for heart disease early is so important.”

While risk factors such as family history and advanced age cannot be changed, most of the others can be eliminated or brought under control. For instance, smokers are two to four times more likely than nonsmokers to develop heart disease, according to the American Heart Association, and smokers who take birth control pills or hormone replacement therapy are at an even greater risk.

Says Collins, “Quitting smoking can greatly reduce your risk of having a heart attack. In addition, other factors such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol can be controlled by making changes to your diet and fitness routine, or by taking medications. You should talk to your doctor about your risk factors, your goals and how to reach them.”

Understanding the Lahey Difference

Lahey’s Heart and Vascular Center is in a unique position to help women at risk for heart disease and heart attack. Lahey’s team includes five female clinical cardiologists and one female cardiothoracic surgeon, setting Lahey apart in an era when, unfortunately, not many women are entering these specialties.

Says Collins, “Although all of Lahey’s cardiologists are highly qualified to meet the needs of our patients, sometimes, and for some patients, having a female doctor can make a difference. Some women prefer a female cardiologist because another woman can understand some of their issues in a way that a man cannot. But like choosing any doctor, it’s very much a personal choice.”

To learn more or to make an appointment with a cardiologist, call 781-744-3250, or visit www.lahey.org/heart.