

The breast or the heart . . . which one do you think takes more women?

When we think about what women need to worry about health-wise, we're more likely to worry about breast cancer than heart attacks. And yet heart disease is the number one killer of women: for every woman who dies of breast cancer, six die of heart disease.

The problem is, we are just having a very hard time getting past the 1960s when the idea that heart disease was a man's disease took root—a disastrous line of thought because it took heart health off the radar not just for women and their doctors, but for research teams who focused their studies on men.

To this day, there is still a lack of research being done specific to women, which is problematic for a number of reasons, including the fact that women's heart attack symptoms sometimes present somewhat differently than they do for men.

There are consequences for the uneven attention. According to Dr. Sharonne N. Hayes, director of the Women's Heart Clinic at the Mayo Clinic, "The lack of relevant research in women has resulted in a substantial sex-based knowledge deficit about everything from the "typical" heart attack symptoms in women, to the risks and benefits of commonly used diagnostic tests and therapies. In current cardiovascular research, we are not necessarily analyzing the data by gender and the need for gender-specific studies is not on the radar screen of researchers."

Even though there isn't as much specific information about women as there is for men, what does help save women's lives is when providers follow the clinical care guidelines for women just as they would for men. "We know that when hospitals have systems in place to ensure they provide care according to the guidelines, women's outcomes improve, even more than men's," notes Hayes.

The other misconception is that if heart disease were to hit a woman, it wouldn't hit until she was old. In fact, heart disease needs to be on our radar at all stages of life with prevention, diagnostics, and therapies used consistently.

Changing the disturbing heart health statistics for women can't happen without attending to the following four bottom line basics (on following page) for both providers and women themselves.

Go RED!

Spread the word: heart disease is the number one killer of women. We're turning Northern Light Health red on Friday, February 7 to make the point. Man, woman or child, wear red!



1. Acknowledge that heart disease can present very differently in women; it can be very subtle (see the symptoms sidebar)
2. Know and be able to recognize the symptoms (see the symptoms sidebar)
3. Understand your risk factors
 - a. Smoking
 - b. Having a mother, father or grandparent who has/had a heart attack, stroke or heart disease
 - c. Having a lifestyle that doesn't include regular exercise
 - d. Unhealthy biometric measures

The following are target biometric measures. Talk with your provider about the biometric numbers that put you specifically at risk.

- e. A BMI below 25
 - f. Blood pressure below 120/80
 - g. Fasting blood glucose below 105
 - h. An LDL cholesterol below 190
4. Know your own biometric numbers and risk factors and develop a personal plan to steadily make some reasonable improvements

Having a firm handle on those four basics goes a long way in being able to respond effectively to the subtle symptoms women can often exhibit with a heart event. The more providers and women understand the symptoms and understand a woman's particular risk factors, the easier it becomes to tease out subtleties like whether the dizziness is related to last week's flu or something more concerning.

Source – Women Heart – The National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease, American Heart Association

Signs and symptoms of a cardiac event may differ between women and men

A recent study in the journal *Circulation* shows that compared with men, women have a 50% greater chance of being delayed in the emergency setting. Symptoms are sometimes not clear and can be attributed to indigestion or anxiety, says Hayes. Know the symptoms of heart attack and if you think you are having a heart attack, say so. "You want a proper diagnosis, and a straightforward blood test and EKG are the starting points," says Hayes.

Reassuringly, Northern Light Health emergency staff are trained in primary and continuing education regarding the signs and symptoms of an acute cardiac event, and how these signs and symptoms can differ in males versus females. Critical therapies are initiated for cardiovascular events, including stroke and heart attack, through early recognition and awareness.

In females, symptoms such as lower back or abdominal pain can be indicative of an acute event, and should be taken seriously, especially when they are unexplainable.

Symptoms

1. Uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain in the center of your chest that lasts more than a few minutes or goes away and comes back.
2. Pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw, or stomach.
3. Shortness of breath with or without chest discomfort.
4. Other signs such as breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea, or lightheadedness.
5. 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.

Prevention

1. 48 million American women are living with or at risk for heart disease. Schedule an appointment with your healthcare provider to learn your personal risk for heart disease.
2. Quit smoking. Did you know that just one year after you quit, you'll cut your risk of coronary heart disease by 50%?
3. Start an exercise program. Just walking 30 minutes a day can lower your risk for heart attack and stroke.
4. Modify your family's diet if needed. [Check out these healthy cooking tips.](#) You'll learn smart substitutions, healthy snacking ideas and better prep methods. For example, with poultry, use the leaner light meat (breasts) instead of the fattier dark meat (legs and thighs), and be sure to remove the skin.