

Heart Disease and Women

Is heart disease a problem for women?

Heart disease affects more women than men and more women die from heart disease than from all cancers combined.

Heart attacks are generally more severe in women than in men. In the first year after a heart attack, women are more likely to die than men are. In the first 6 years after a heart attack, women are almost twice as likely to have a second heart attack. These differences are because women tend to have heart attacks at older ages than men who have heart attacks.

Heart attack warning signs include:

- chest discomfort in the center of the chest that lasts for more than a few minutes, or that goes away and comes back
- pain or discomfort in other areas of the upper body, including the arms, back, neck, jaw, or stomach
- shortness of breath
- breaking out in a cold sweat
- nausea, indigestion, or heartburn
- light-headedness.

Some women who have a heart attack do not know it. Heart attack symptoms in women may be different from those experienced by men, for example:

- sudden weakness or unexplained tiredness
- unexplained anxiety and nervousness
- swelling of the ankles or lower legs.

Because they may not feel the typical pain in the left side of their chest, many women may ignore symptoms of a heart attack.

How can women reduce their risk for heart disease?

- If you have high blood pressure, carefully follow your healthcare provider's instructions for keeping it under control.
- If you are a smoker, stop smoking.
- Lose weight if you are overweight. Maintain your ideal weight.
- Eat a healthy diet that includes:
 - avoiding salty foods and not adding salt to food
 - increasing fiber, fruits, and vegetables
 - avoiding foods high in fat and cholesterol.
- Exercise according to your healthcare provider's instructions.
- Get enough rest and learn to use relaxation methods to help reduce stress.
- Treat and control medical conditions such as diabetes and high cholesterol.

If you are taking hormone therapy, you and your healthcare provider should discuss the risks and benefits. Hormone therapy may increase the risk for heart disease or stroke.

Talk with your provider about taking aspirin. Low-dose aspirin therapy reduces the risk of stroke for women. But it only helps to lower rates of heart attack and other cardiac problems in women 65 and older.

Make sure that your provider knows about any other medicines you are taking. If you decide you need to make changes in the way you live, you probably won't be able to turn your life around all at once. Try to develop healthy habits that incorporate lifestyle goals. If you do, you will greatly decrease your chances for developing heart disease.

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