
Women and Heart Disease - Clinical Quality Management Article

Do you know the leading cause of death in women?

If you answered heart disease, you are correct! Women in the United States are four to six (4-6) times more prone to be stricken by heart disease than breast cancer. Also, heart disease is the leading cause of death *above* cancers in women over the age of 65. Overall, about 40% of deaths in women are from heart and blood vessel disease.

Most women do not realize they may be at risk. In 1988, the Olympian athlete Florence Griffith Joyner was afflicted and died by the description of an “apparent heart seizure”. For African-American women, such as Ms. Griffith-Joyner, the risk of sudden death is 69% higher than that of Caucasian women.

What risk factors should I be aware of?

Risk factors, to name a few, include:

- Smoking
- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- High blood cholesterol
- Being overweight
- Inactivity, in other words, lack of exercise
- Unhealthy eating habits
- Ethnic origin, i.e. African American women are at higher risk
- Heredity, i.e. if someone in your immediate family has had heart disease, you may have a predisposition to develop heart disease

What are the main problems with heart disease?

Heart attack and stroke are the primary diagnoses for heart disease with women.

What symptoms do I need to be aware of for a heart attack?

Primary symptoms of a heart attack are listed below:

- Chest pain
- Any discomfort in upper body areas such as the arms (one or both), the back area, neck (front or back) jaw pain, or stomach discomfort
- Being short of breath
- Sweating
- Feeling sick to your stomach, which may or may not be associated with vomiting
- Feeling dizzy or lightheaded

PLEASE NOTE that **any** or **all** of these symptoms could be critical to your health. In addition, symptoms could be unusual; in other words, you have a friend who experienced chest pressure, but you are not having chest pressure. You are however, feeling very light-headed and sweating. These could be symptoms of a heart attack.

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I have told my doctor about my increasing episodes of being sick to my stomach, feeling exhausted, and being dizzy. I have had these for about 4 months off and on. He tells me I am stressed, but I do not feel stressed. What should I do?

In one study conducted by the University of Maryland, the symptoms above were the classic symptoms of women who were experiencing a heart attack or chest pain. In some instances, they had these symptoms for up to six (6) months.

Try to talk with your doctor again; if he/she does not order any cardiac tests, please seek another opinion, **or**, call 911 or your local Emergency Medical Services number if symptoms recur.

What is the care for the symptoms of a heart attack?

Call 911 or your local Emergency Medical Services number right away; if you are already a cardiac patient, your heart doctor has probably already provided you with instructions on what to do in the event of any of the above symptoms.

Remember; do not drive yourself to the hospital. If you have a fainting episode while driving, even more tragic circumstances could occur.

What are the primary symptoms of a stroke?

The primary symptoms of a stroke are listed below:

- Numbness or weakness of any part of the face, arms or legs (usually one side of the body or the other)
- A feeling of confusion or lack of understanding what is said to you or read – usually occurs suddenly
- Trouble with seeing – usually occurs suddenly
- Difficulty with balance or walking – usually occurs suddenly
- Feeling lightheaded or dizzy – usually occurs suddenly
- Headaches of a severe nature – occurs suddenly

What is the care for the symptoms of a stroke?

Call 911 or your local Emergency Medical Services number right away.

Ladies, take care of yourselves!

sources:

www.americanheart.org/red
www.americanheart.org/presenter
www.womenshealth.about.com
www.umm.edu
www.familydoctor.org