

# Heart Disease in Women

## Is heart disease a problem for women?

Heart disease is the leading cause of death of American women. More women die from heart disease than from cancer.

A heart attack can happen when there are problems with the blood vessels that bring blood to the heart (the coronary arteries). For example, fatty deposits called plaque may build up in the coronary arteries and make them narrower. The narrowing decreases blood flow to the heart. Plaque also increases the chance that blood clots may form and block a blood vessel, which can cause a heart attack or stroke.

In the first year after a heart attack, women have an increased risk of death. In the first 6 years after a heart attack, they also have a higher risk of a second heart attack. Women are at high risk often because they are older at the time of the heart attack and have other medical problems.

Not everyone has the same symptoms. The most common symptoms of a heart attack include:

- Chest pain or pressure, squeezing, or fullness in the center of your chest that lasts more than a few minutes, or goes away and comes back (may feel like indigestion or heartburn)
- Pain or discomfort in one or both arms or shoulders, or in your back, neck, jaw, or stomach
- Trouble breathing
- Breaking out in a cold sweat for no known reason

Along with these symptoms, you may also feel very tired, faint, or be sick to your stomach.

Sometimes you can be having a heart attack and not know it. Many women have chest pain or pressure, but sometimes symptoms in women are different from men's symptoms. Or women may have additional symptoms, such as:

- 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 the symptoms of a heart attack. Call 911 for emergency help right away if you have these symptoms. Do not drive yourself to the hospital. Immediate emergency care improves your chances of survival and may help avoid damage to your heart.

## How can women lower 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.

- Try to keep a healthy weight. If you are overweight, talk to your provider about ways to lose 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, cholesterol, and sugar
- 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 helps to lower a woman's risk of heart attack and other heart problems only if she is 65 or 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 your lifestyle goals. If you do, you will greatly decrease your chances for developing heart disease.

You can get more information from:

- American Heart Association  
1-800-AHA-USA-1 (1-800-242-8721)  
[www.heart.org](http://www.heart.org)

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