

Women and Heart Disease

Once mistaken to solely affect men, heart disease has become the leading cause of death in women in the United States. Coronary heart disease (CHD) is often fatal, and approximately two-thirds of women who die suddenly have no previously recognizable symptoms. Others delay potentially life-saving treatment or are not treated as aggressively as men because of less obvious presentations. A heightened awareness of women at risk and a different approach than that used in men is crucial to diagnosing CHD before late stages develop.

What is Coronary Heart Disease?

CHD is a narrowing of the small vessels that supply oxygenated blood to the heart. It is usually caused by atherosclerosis, a condition in which a build-up of cholesterol and fat form a plaque in arteries resulting in decreased blood flow to the heart. As the disease progresses, it can result in a “myocardial infarction” or “heart attack.”

How do signs and symptoms differ from men?

Heart disease is often associated with chest pain; however, women may not always present with this classic symptom. Instead of pain, it may feel more like tightness, aching, burning, or heaviness in the chest or even between the shoulder blades. The chest discomfort may radiate to the neck, jaw, shoulders, arms, or even ears. These symptoms should never be ignored because they don't sound like a classic heart attack. Other important “atypical” symptoms include feeling tired despite adequate rest, difficulty breathing, trouble sleeping, new or worse headaches, abdominal pain or discomfort, and feeling scared or nervous.

Women also tend to have more “silent ischemia” which means that despite decreased blood flow to the heart, there is no chest pain. Even when reporting symptoms, women show less obstructive CHD compared to men with the same severity of symptoms, suggesting a different disease process. Most importantly, when women do develop greater obstructions, they often have a worse outcome including a greater risk of death compared to men. Unfortunately, all of these differences make it harder to detect CHD in women.

What steps can I take to prevent CHD?

The good news is that it is never too late to start taking steps towards a healthy heart. Although some risk factors such as increasing age, previous heart attack, gender, and family history cannot be changed, there are many risk factors that can be modified. A healthier lifestyle including exercise, a healthy diet, weight reduction, and smoking cessation are recommended. Blood pressure, cholesterol, and diabetes must be kept under control with medication if lifestyle interventions alone have not worked. Aspirin may be considered in women who are at high risk. Taking these preventative steps in women, and for those who already have heart disease, will go a long way towards reducing the risk of heart attack, stroke, and death from CHD. For More information visit www.HeartandHealth.com or contact us at Heart and Health 1350 Deer Park Ave N- Babylon NY 11703 (631) 482-1355