



Women and Heart Disease

Heart disease is the No. 1 cause of death among American women. Approximately 267,000 women die each year from heart attacks. Women report having early warning signs of an impending heart attack as much as a month before the attack occurs. Understanding the early warning signs of a heart attack will help decrease your chance of death.

What is a heart attack?

A heart attack is damage to the heart muscle caused by unsatisfactory blood flow to the heart. It is also known as a *myocardial infarct*.

What causes a heart attack?

Unhealthy eating or other factors (e.g., genetics) can cause fat deposits to build up and harden inside the blood vessels that feed the heart. If one of the pieces of plaque breaks off, it creates a rough area inside the vessel. As blood flows through the vessel it may become trapped against the rough area, creating a blood clot. It is this blood clot that blocks the blood vessel. The block does not allow oxygenated blood to be carried to the heart. The lack of oxygen and blood causes the heart attack.

Symptoms of a heart attack

- Unexplained severe fatigue or trouble sleeping, especially for an extended period of time.
- Persistent indigestion-like pain in the chest area.
- Persistent discomfort, crushing pain, pressure, burning, or ache in the chest. May be mild or severe. May be described as building in intensity and getting worse over time. May go down into your left arm.
- Pain that is worse with activity but decreases with rest.
- Pain or dull ache under the arm (may be both arms), jaw area (toothache-like), neck, or back.
- Pain along with sweating, nausea, vomiting, or shortness of breath.

If you have any of these symptoms go to the nearest hospital emergency room immediately. If you are alone, call 911.

How do I prevent a heart attack?

- Eat a low fat, low salt diet.
- Take part in regular physical activity.
- Get regular checkups by your doctor.
- Do not smoke.
- Keep blood pressure down by eating right, not smoking, and getting physically active. If high blood pressure already exists, take medicine as prescribed by your health care provider.

Sources

American Heart Association. (2006). *Facts about women and cardiovascular diseases*. Available online <http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?on=2-8-06>.

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