

## Women and heart disease

Today's frantic lifestyle requires women to become super heroes by juggling work, children, husbands, housework, cooking, as well as dealing with the pressure of looking great all at the same. It's easy to forget your own health in the process and it usually takes some drastic happening to force you to slow down. Women need to take better care of themselves, especially their hearts.

In South Africa, Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is a major killer, as 1 in 4 women before the age of 60 will have some form of heart condition. The risk for developing breast cancer is 1 in 35; therefore, while it is vital to do regular breast examinations, you also need to be consciously making heart healthy choices.

### Women vs. men

Women generally tend to develop heart disease 10 years later in their life than men, however, the effects are often greater, in that unlike men, women are more likely to die after a heart attack. Even the symptoms of a heart attack experienced by women are different to those experienced by men; women tend to have a wide range of sensations including:

- An uneasy feeling in the chest
- Pain in the shoulder or jaw
- Abdominal pain
- A fluttering heartbeat
- Shortness of breath
- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Dizziness and/or fainting
- Swollen feet

These symptoms are easily dismissed as a stomach bug or even indigestion. An indication that something more serious may be wrong is if the symptoms worsen when the heart has to work harder such as with exercise or increased activity. Approximately 35% of female heart attacks are believed to go unnoticed or unreported, and because of the increased age at which heart attacks usually occur, women are more likely to have other diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure.

Now that you know what a big concern heart disease is in women, you need to know how to prevent it:

- Know your family history, if your father or any male family member has had a stroke or heart attack before the age of 55 or your mother or any female family member before the age of 65, your risk of developing heart disease is increased.
- Follow a healthy, balanced diet low in saturated fats and high in whole grains, fruits, vegetables and legumes.
- If you smoke, try to quit smoking as soon as possible. Women who smoke double their risk of stroke and the more cigarettes smoked, the higher the risk. Non-smokers who breathe second hand smoke have a 25 – 30% increased risk of heart disease since it is not inhaled through a filter. Women who are exposed to smoke on a regular basis, and are overweight, inactive or use oral contraceptives also have an increased risk for developing heart disease, especially after the age of 35.
- Reach and maintain a healthy body weight. When you are overweight, your risk for developing heart disease is increased.

- Exercise regularly, at least 30 minutes most days of the week. Exercise has a protective role in reducing the risk factors for the development of heart disease and diabetes (a strong contributing factor to the development of heart disease), helps in lowering blood pressure, improves weight loss, and helps with the possible improvement in blood cholesterol levels.
- Check the following regularly: blood pressure, blood cholesterol and blood glucose (watch your local newspaper for dates of the screenings that The Heart and Stroke Foundation offers in shopping centres).
- If you have high blood pressure, try to reduce it by cutting down on your salt intake and exercising regularly.
- Be aware of the symptoms of a heart attack and keep emergency numbers readily available.

The way you live each day affects your heart. An unhealthy lifestyle can lead to a heart attack or stroke at any time so making healthy choices today could save your life.

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