

HEALTH TOPIC:

WOMEN AND HEART DISEASE

*(EXCERPTED FROM **HEALTHY AGING**, THE NEWSLETTER OF HEALTH PROMOTION SERVICES)*

Women, justifiably so, fear a diagnosis of breast cancer. Breast cancer is widely perceived as the number one health threat faced by women. However, the primary cause of death among women today is heart disease. Each year 250,000 women will die as a result of heart disease. In fact, heart disease claims the lives of more women than breast cancer, diabetes and Alzheimer's Disease combined.

For many years men and their symptoms were the major focus of the medical community. The classic symptoms of a heart attack, pressure on the chest and pain that radiates out to the jaw and down the arm, are symptoms almost exclusively felt by male coronary victims. Many doctors know only these symptoms and will not confirm that a heart attack has occurred if a patient does not exhibit these signs.

Women on the other hand, can have a different set of symptoms when suffering a cardiac episode. Many report feeling fatigue, nausea, shortness of breath, palpitations, heavy sweating and pain in the back and/or abdomen. Rather than experience a sudden dramatic event that virtually screams CALL AN AMBULANCE, a woman's symptoms can be dismissed as the flu or incorrectly diagnosed as stress.

Even diagnostic tests are designed to check more for male symptoms and consequences than those of a female. Both sexes accumulate plaque in their arteries. In men, plaque builds up in the form of a clog. In women, plaque collects in layers. Some tests that are used to detect blockages in arteries are designed to identify clots or clogs and therefore miss many cases of coronary artery disease in women. As a result, women are often misdiagnosed and do not receive the aggressive treatment that would be given to a man. This course of care includes the use of blood thinners and cholesterol-lowering drugs. In addition, surgery might be performed to insert a pacemaker to regulate the heartbeat, or insert stents to open blocked arteries.

There are tests such as nuclear imaging and the echocardiogram which may be better suited for detecting heart disease in women. These exams monitor the blood flow to and through the heart. In addition, while in the midst of a heart attack, women show an increase in the levels of certain proteins and hormones. If a coronary is suspected, a blood test can indicate their levels in the blood.

Women can take steps to lower their risk of heart disease. They should know their cholesterol, glucose and blood pressure levels. If they smoke, quitting is imperative. Obesity and diabetes both can increase a women's chances of dying

from heart disease and both must be controlled. Your diet should be low in fat. Exercise can both strengthen the cardiovascular system and reduce cholesterol, glucose and blood pressure levels if they are high. As with any other disease, women need to be particularly vigilant if heart disease runs in the family. Most of all, if you are a woman and you are experiencing the symptoms listed here, don't delay. Go to the emergency room.

The American Heart Association offers programs and information that are designed specifically for women. For more information, call the American Heart Association at 1-888-MY-HEART. To reach the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, call 311.