



HAYNES CARDIOVASCULAR INSTITUTE

Heart Disease in Women

Traditional risk factors for heart disease—such as high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol, and obesity—may affect women differently than men. Some risk factors for heart disease cannot be controlled, such as your age or family history. Regular health milestones like menopause and pregnancy can affect heart health. And preterm delivery and pregnancy complications such as preeclampsia and gestational diabetes can increase cardiovascular risk.

- Heart disease causes 1 in 3 deaths in women each year, killing approximately one woman every minute.
- 90% of women have one or more risk factors for developing heart disease.
- More women than men die from a heart attack before making it to the hospital — 52% v. 42%.
- Two-thirds of women who suffer a heart attack never fully recover, and many end up disabled by heart failure.

Serious Cardiovascular Conditions Affecting Women Include:

Coronary Artery Disease (CAD) — When plaque narrows or blocks the large arteries that supply blood to the heart, this can lead to coronary artery disease. A common symptom is angina, a chest pain that occurs when the heart doesn't get enough oxygen-rich blood. Angina tends to worsen with activity or emotional stress.

Arrhythmias — An arrhythmia is an abnormal heartbeat. The heart can beat too quickly, too slowly, or with an irregular rhythm. While some arrhythmias are harmless, others can be life-threatening due to stroke

risk or the inability for the heart to pump enough oxygen-rich blood to the body.

Stress cardiomyopathy — Stress cardiomyopathy is a temporary but dangerous heart condition brought on by severe stress. The left ventricle of the heart temporarily enlarges and doesn't pump well, possibly due to a surge in stress hormones. This results in heart attack-like symptoms, which are treatable but must not be ignored.

Valve abnormalities — Our heart has four valves that let blood flow in, through, and out of the heart, enabling circulation. "Regurgitation" is when blood leaks back through a valve in the wrong direction. "Stenosis" is when a valve narrows and blood flow is blocked. The main sign of heart valve disease is an unusual heartbeat called a heart murmur.

Nearly 80% of premature heart disease can be prevented with lifestyle changes.

—Center for Disease Control

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Know the Signs of a Heart Attack in Women

Symptoms of a heart attack tend to be different in women than in men, and understanding those differences could mean the difference between life and death.

Symptoms Common in Women

- Unusual upper body pain or discomfort in one or both arms, back, shoulders, neck, jaw, or upper stomach
- Shortness of breath
- Breaking out in a cold sweat
- Unusual or unexplained fatigue
- Light-headedness or sudden dizziness
- Nausea

Additional Symptoms Common in Both Men and Women

- Discomfort, pressure, or pain in the center of the chest that may last for a few minutes, or go away and come back
- Heartburn, vomiting, and abdominal pain
- Pounding heart or change in heart rhythm
- Paleness

Tips for Peace of Mind

1. Keep a Gratitude Journal

Take some time each day to give thanks for the good things and people you might take for granted. This can have a profound effect on your well-being and relationships.¹

2. Breathe Away Your Difficult Feelings

To avoid stress, frustration, and anxiety, make sure to set aside time to practice mindful breathing. This will help reduce difficult feelings and keep you calmer during tense situations. Mindful breathing also helps people stay “present” in the moment.²

3. Listen More and Stress Less

When things get hectic, we tend to have more heightened emotions that flare up within seconds. Our emotions can also interfere with our ability to listen, causing our minds to wander and take away from our ability to stay focused. Make an effort to listen more mindfully. This will allow you to pay attention to the speaker without interrupting, getting defensive, or feeling the need to always be right.³

4. A Healthy Body Means Having Peace of Mind

If you are out of sorts or not feeling your best, take some time out to do a mental scan of your body. It provides a rare opportunity for you to experience your body as it is, without judging or trying to change it. Sit on a chair, close your eyes, and sense every portion of your body one by one. As you do this, breathe and release the tension within that specific area.⁴

5. Take Peaceful Walks and Share a Smile

Avoid burnout by taking the time to savor the moments by enjoying a peaceful walk, paying attention to the sights, smells, and sounds around you. Try to walk a different route each day so you don't become too accustomed to any of these things and start to take them for granted.⁵

If you notice any of these symptoms in yourself or another person, call 911 right away.