

## Heart Disease Can Often Be Prevented With Informed Lifestyle Choices

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**H**eat disease is the leading cause of death of women in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). And while that might surprise many, more startling is the fact that almost 64 percent of women who die suddenly of coronary heart disease had no previous symptoms.

"Once they reach the age of 40, the majority of women have at least one risk factor for heart disease," says Jacqueline Hollywood, cardiologist at Hackensack University Medical Center. "Most women still fear cancer more, though the risk of a woman dying from cancer is actually much less than dying from heart disease."

But the news is not all bad.

According to Dr. Hollywood, 80 percent of cardiac risk factors can be substantially reduced with lifestyle modifications in diet, exercise and nutrition. "Only about 20 percent of risk factors are genetic," she adds.

### IDENTIFYING RISK FACTORS

"Women should have their first cardiovascular evaluation around the time they reach menopause, just to make sure that risk factors are being addressed," says Benita Burke, medical director, Valley Medical Group's Heart Care for Women practice. "It is a great time to get an evaluation from a cardiologist and see where you are in terms of risk factors and what you can do to better them."

Classic risk factors for heart disease include high blood pressure, diabetes, smoking, physical inactivity, overweight or obesity, and family history of heart disease.

"Heart disease, diabetes or high blood pressure, for example, don't begin the day the disease is diagnosed," says Mary Abed, a cardiologist at Atlantic Health System's Chilton and Morristown Medical Centers. "The conditions have been building up for years; our focus is to try to prevent them."

According to Dr. Burke, women may also be at risk of heart disease if they had a history of preeclampsia in pregnancy, underwent breast cancer treatments such as radiation or chemotherapy, suffer from autoimmune diseases, or experienced menopause before the age of 50.

African-American women have a higher incidence of heart disease than other women. Moreover, African-American women are also at a higher risk for stroke, hypertension, diabetes and obesity - all risk factors for heart disease.

It is possible that genetics plays a part in the high incidence of hypertension in the African-American community. "Researchers are looking into a gene that makes African-American patients much more sensitive to the effects of salt," she said. "We want to get the word out that having a low-salt diet is especially important for the African-American population because of their sensitivity

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to salt."

An American Heart Association awareness survey shows that only about one third of African-American women are aware that heart disease is their greatest health risk, and only half of that group knows the symptoms of heart attack or stroke.

"Today, many people live through heart attacks, which have damaged their heart muscle, and now we have an aging population that is living with heart failure," says Dr. Abed. People with hypertension need to get the disease under control because it is one the biggest causes of chronic heart and kidney failure."

Smoking is also a major risk factor for heart disease. "It is absolutely imperative that if you are a smoker, you stop," adds Dr. Abed. "People think that if they have just three cigarettes a day it's OK, but there are no safe numbers, in my mind. Every time you have a cigarette, you cause vasoconstriction or narrowing of the vessels; you cause the platelets that help with blood clots become stickier; and if you have injury to the lining of the vessel, which tobacco can cause, you can form a clot that is going to block that vessel."

### RECOGNIZING SYMPTOMS

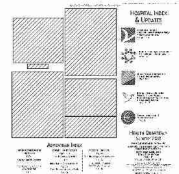
The symptoms of heart disease often differ between the sexes, making it more challenging for women to recognize that they are experiencing a cardiac episode.

One challenge to diagnosing heart problems in women is that women's arteries are a little different that those of men's. "Women's hearts have a tendency to be smaller, so the arteries are smaller," says Dr. Hollywood. If obstructed with plaque, these smaller arteries can be more challenging to both diagnose and treat.

Women can have a lot more atypical symptoms, such as feeling short of breath, and not necessarily pain in the chest but pain in the neck and jaw. "Women also may experience gastrointestinal symptoms such



Dr. Mary Abed



nausea, which can be an indication of heart disease or angina in a woman but not necessarily in a man," adds Dr. Hollywood.

Shortness of breath and generalized fatigue are also common symptoms in women with cardiac problems. "But chest pains are still the most common presentation in both sexes," says Dr. Burke.

"I have women who come into the office and say they are experiencing shortness of breath but write it off as the effect of weight gain," says Dr. Abed. "But when I check my records and note that the patient weighed the same one year ago, the shortness of breath clearly is not being caused by weight gain. Women need to be more aware."

#### TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR HEALTH

Annual exams can help your primary care physician detect changes in your blood pressure, glucose and cholesterol levels, and weight. Changes in these areas may indicate cardiac problems.

"If there is an abnormality, even if it is minor and you are not having any symptoms, don't wait years to follow up," says Dr. Hollywood. "The earlier the problems are treated the less likely they will turn into artery disease or a stroke."



Dr. Jacqueline Hollywood

It's also important to make sure to share any new symptom with your physician. "If you are having symptoms, usually the next step is to see a cardiologist," says Dr. Hollywood.

It's important that before seeing a cardiologist you jot down some notes on the symptoms you are having. "Get a family history of heart attacks, strokes, rhythm abnormalities, pace makers; this is valuable information,"

adds Dr. Hollywood.

"Make sure you are upfront and open about the symptoms you have been feeling and don't minimize them or you might not be taken seriously. With aggressive treatment and risk factor modification most cardiac risk factors can be considerably reduced."

**"Make sure you are upfront and open about the symptoms you have been feeling ..."**

DR. JACQUELINE HOLLYWOOD

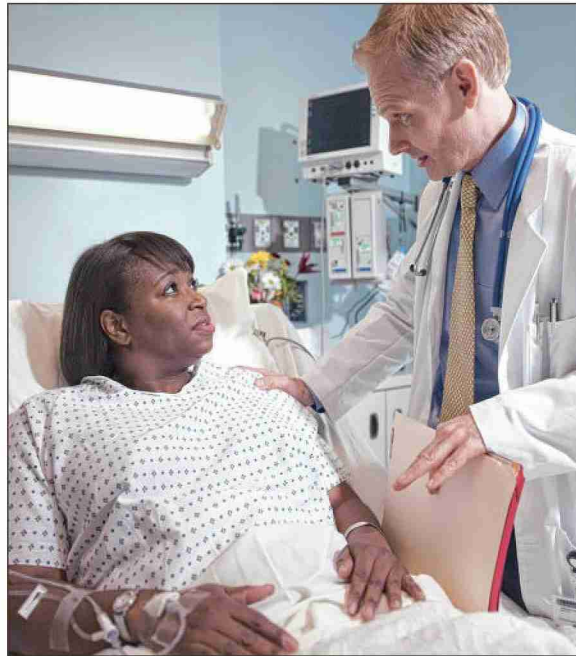


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**African-American women have a higher incidence of heart disease than other women. They are also at higher risk for other health conditions related to heart disease.**