

Changes during menopause increases risk of heart disease and stroke

February 23 2010

When women hear the word menopause, they often think about hot flashes, hormone shifts and mood swings. But what about heart disease? Studies show a woman's risk of heart disease intensifies drastically around the time of natural menopause, which for most women is around the age of 50. This news may come as a surprise, but experts explain that understanding risk factors is an important first step, and reassure women that there are ways to lower your risk.

"Many women younger than 50 have not yet gone through menopause and still have high levels of the female hormone estrogen in their blood, which is thought to help protect the heart. After [menopause](#), however, the levels of estrogen in a woman's body drop significantly and can contribute to the higher risks of cardiovascular disease," explains Vera Rigolin, MD, associate director of the Center for Women's Cardiovascular Health in the Bluhm Cardiovascular Institute of Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

Weight gain is also a factor that may play a role in postmenopausal risk of [heart disease](#). Maintaining a healthy weight often becomes difficult after your body experiences a change in hormone levels. Extra mass can take a toll on the body causing physical inactivity, high blood pressure, diabetes, and high cholesterol, all risk factors that can lead to heart attack and stroke.

Detecting heart disease in women can be difficult. Many women are unaware that symptoms of the disease may differ from those of men.

Although women often experience chest discomfort when presenting with a heart attack, they commonly have other, more subtle symptoms, including fatigue, nausea, shortness of breath, jaw pain and general discomfort in the chest and abdominal area.

"In some women, plaque can build in the smallest blood vessels called the microvascular circulation. These blockages do not show up in an angiogram," says Rigolin. "In these cases, we often use Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) with medication to visualize blood flow within the small blood vessels when other standard tests do not provide us answers."

Women, especially those who are menopausal can reduce the risk of heart disease by adopting a healthy lifestyle.

"If you are a smoker, quit immediately and avoid second hand smoke. Eat a diet rich in fruits and vegetables and exercise at least three times per week to maintain a healthy body weight," says Rigolin.

Rigolin also recommends visiting your health care provider at least once per year to have your blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol levels checked.

Provided by Northwestern Memorial Hospital

Citation: Changes during menopause increases risk of heart disease and stroke (2010, February 23) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-02-menopause-heart-disease.html>

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