

Awareness still lacking of seriousness of heart disease in women, cardiologist warns

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Although heart disease remains the No. 1 killer nationally for women—responsible for one out of every three deaths—many of today's women still underestimate the seriousness of the disease and their risks, says Liliana Cohen, MD, a board-certified cardiologist with The Robert Wood Johnson Medical Group.

"The latest [American Heart Association](#) statistics reveal that [heart disease](#) is more deadly than all forms of cancer combined, killing one woman every minute. Yet, these same studies show that relatively few [women](#) believe that heart disease is their greatest health threat," says Dr. Cohen, who also serves as Assistant Professor of Medicine, University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey–Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, and participating physician in its Non-Invasive Cardiovascular Services program. "The reality is that 90 percent of women have one or more risk factors for developing heart disease. These misconceptions could be putting women's lives at risk every day."

"The symptom many women focus on is chest pain, but the reality is that women are also likely to experience other types of symptoms, including shortness of breath, back or jaw pain, and nausea or vomiting. This misperception may lead many women to ignore or minimize their symptoms and delay getting life-saving treatment," Dr. Cohen explains.

Other symptoms of a heart attack for both women and men include dizziness, lightheadedness, or fainting; pain in the lower chest or upper abdomen; and [extreme fatigue](#).

"When in doubt, it is always best to seek medical assistance," says Dr. Cohen, who specializes in echocardiography, a technique that uses ultrasound to diagnose cardiovascular diseases.

Dr. Cohen also recommends that women take proactive steps to prevent or control conditions that may put them at risk. She advises:

- **Keep track of your blood pressure and cholesterol levels.** If either or both are high, work with your physician to develop a strategy for controlling them. If you have diabetes, properly controlling it is critical to lowering your risk.
- **Exercise.** It is extremely important to avoid a sedentary lifestyle. Ideally, you should aim for more than 30 minutes of exercise at least five times per week. That doesn't necessarily mean high-impact classes at the local gym; walking, gardening and other activities that keep you moving and active can also help.
- **Commit yourself to a healthy diet.** Look for foods that are low in saturated fat and trans-fat, as well as those that are high in fiber. Whole-grain foods, fruits, vegetables, and legumes like peas or beans will help round out a well-balanced diet, as will foods that are high in antioxidants.
- **Strive for a healthy weight.** Being obese or overweight can increase your risk of heart disease significantly because it contributes to other risk factors like diabetes. Your physician can help you determine the ideal weight for your body type and age and provide suggestions on how to reach that goal.
- **Stop smoking.** Smoking has been found to significantly increase risk for heart attacks, as well as your risk of dying if you have a heart attack.

Provided by Robert Wood Johnson Medical School

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