

What women should know about their heart health

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Heart disease and stroke continue to be the most dangerous threats to a woman's health. In the U.S., 1 in 4 women die from cardiovascular disease. During February, which is American Heart Month, there continues to be an emphasis on raising awareness about the risks to help save lives.

Dr. Sharonne N. Hayes, a cardiologist and founder of the Mayo Clinic Women's Heart Clinic, says that, while women's heart care has significantly improved in the past 20 years, there is still much to learn about heart [disease](#) in women.

"There are conditions that affect women that either don't affect men, like pregnancy-related heart disease, or that affect women differently, such as [heart failure](#)," says Dr. Hayes.

"We've just scratched the surface of what we need to know about heart disease. Each time we peel back a layer, we realize we need to know more."

Risk Factors

Dr. Rekha Mankad, a cardiologist and director of the Mayo Clinic Women's Heart Clinic, says there are certain factors that put someone at a higher risk of heart disease, such as [high blood pressure](#), hypertension, diabetes, smoking and high cholesterol. However, when it comes to these [risks](#), she says there are differences between men and women.

"Hypertension is very common as we all get older, but it's important to recognize that women have more hypertension as we age. It becomes a more prevalent risk factor. It doesn't necessarily act differently in the setting of how it makes you at elevated risk for heart disease, although there is an increased risk of stroke, and that does play a big role in women as we age because of that very prevalent high blood pressure," Dr. Mankad says. "Diabetes has a much bigger difference between men and women. A diabetic woman has a greater risk of heart disease compared to a diabetic man. So, with everything else being equal, if you have diabetes and you're female, that risk is higher than if you have diabetes and you're a male."

Dr. Mankad says that's similar to smoking because a female smoker has a higher risk than a male smoker. In addition to the traditional risk factors for [heart disease](#), women have nontraditional risk factors, such as pregnancy-related risks.

Heart Attack Symptoms

Both men and women have a wide range of symptoms of [heart](#) attack. Knowing what they are and when to call 911 is something Dr. Hayes continues to stress to her patients.

"(Symptoms may include) anytime there's chest pressure, pain or discomfort in the chest—it may be in the jaw or radiate to the back, or go up to the neck—shortness of breath, as well as cold sweats. For [women](#) in particular, nausea and vomiting, or shortness of breath, all of those should signal a need to get emergency help."

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