

Educating women about heart attacks could save lives

January 13 2012

Heart attacks in women go largely unrecognized 30 to 55 percent of the time and those who miss the warning signs and fail or delay getting help, run the risk of death or grave disability. But researchers at Binghamton University and SUNY Upstate Medical University have developed an educational program they believe will shorten the time to treatment and ultimately, save lives.

Women often don't have the same kind of chest pains that men generally experience during a [heart attack](#). They may also have a range of other symptoms, not all of them easy for the typical sufferer to identify and so in many cases, they tend to just ignore the [warning signs](#).

In hopes of shortening women's time to treatment, Pamela Stewart Fahs, professor and Decker Chair in Rural Nursing at Binghamton University's Decker School of Nursing, is collaborating with [Melanie](#) Kalman, associate professor and director of research, and Margaret Wells, assistant professor, in the College of Nursing at SUNY Upstate Medical University, on a project called "Matters of Your Heart." The goal is to develop an effective program to educate [women](#) about heart attack symptoms and also to teach about the early warning signs that a heart attack might be on the way.

Stewart Fahs, Kalman and Wells conducted the first phase of their project under an intramural research grant from SUNY Upstate. Their first task was to develop a questionnaire to measure a woman's knowledge of heart attack symptoms and warning signs. They then

created a pilot version of an educational presentation.

Working with 141 post-menopausal women, Stewart Fahs and Kalman held small-group sessions to administer the questionnaire, present the program and then give the questionnaire again.

"We did find that the educational program increased knowledge," Stewart Fahs says.

The researchers based the presentation in part on a program that Stewart Fahs developed several years ago to teach rural residents about symptoms of a stroke. That program employed an acronym created by the American Heart Association — FAST, for Face, Arm, Speech and Time.

The new program uses a similar mnemonic device, and Stewart Fahs says the method seems to help, especially when women practice putting it to use. The next phase of the project will focus on testing whether using acronyms for female heart attack and its warning symptoms improve knowledge as compared to using an educational program without them. The work will begin this spring, thanks to a grant from the Rural Nurse Organization. Stewart Fahs will administer the questionnaire and program to women in rural areas, while Kalman and Wells concentrate on urban Syracuse, NY. The population they have studied so far is too small to reveal whether the program works better for one demographic or the other, Stewart Fahs says.

In a second phase of their research, Kalman and Stewart Fahs plan to give the presentation to many more women over a broader geographical area. Eventually, they hope to do a longitudinal study to discover whether their program improves the way women respond when they experience signs of a possible heart attack.

"Having knowledge doesn't necessarily change your behavior," Stewart Fahs says. "But if you don't have the knowledge, you're unlikely to change."

Once they've perfected the program, the researchers will share it with hospitals, community health agencies and other healthcare organizations. Besides offering the PowerPoint slides for classroom use, they might someday use communication technologies to give the presentation a broader reach, Stewart Fahs says.

"There should be a way, through cell phone apps or some kind of Internet application, to get this message out to women once it's fully developed and tested."

Stewart Fahs, Kalman and Wells hope that the results of their latest research will include better outcomes for more female victims of heart attack.

"The more aware you are of the signs and symptoms," Stewart Fahs says, "And the more aware you are of the risk of heart disease for women, the better able you are to be proactive."

Provided by Binghamton University

Citation: Educating women about heart attacks could save lives (2012, January 13) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-01-women-heart.html>

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