Women and heart attacks: The symptoms are subtle

Posted by Dr. Charles A. Bush / Ohio State University February 18, 2009 00:00AM

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When you think of a disease that may result in death in women, breast, ovarian, or cervical cancer might come to mind.

However, coronary heart disease is the leading cause of death among women in the United States and is responsible for 1 in every 3 female deaths. The older a woman gets, the more likely she is to develop heart and vascular disease and to die from that disease.

Less Noticeable Symptoms

Heart (cardiovascular) disease can lead to a heart attack or stroke, which may be experienced differently in men and women. While the most well-known symptoms include chest or arm pain, shortness of breath, dizziness, and nausea, women often have few, different, or no symptoms. Or they may experience vague symptoms such as:

- Unusual tiredness
- Trouble sleeping
- Difficulty breathing
- Indigestion
- Anxiety

Women are less likely than men to survive a heart attack, perhaps because they either have few or seemingly minor symptoms or fail to recognize the seriousness of the symptoms, and they delay seeking treatment.

When to Call 911

Do not ignore symptoms that you may deem insignificant if they feel unusual to you.

- Wait no more than 5 minutes to call 911 if you think you, or someone else, may be having a heart attack.
- Try to remain calm as you wait for help.
- Do not drive yourself to the hospital.

Treatment should start within one hour of the onset of symptoms for the best outcome.

Live a Heart Healthy Life

Women over age 55 and those with a close family member with heart disease are at the greatest risk. However, preventative measures are lifelong practices and it is never too early to practice heart-healthy habits. A wide range of factors can contribute to the development of heart disease; fortunately, many can be controlled or monitored and there are preventive steps you can take to reduce your risk of developing this disease:

- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Engage in regular physical activity.
- Do not smoke.
- Get tested for diabetes. (Women with diabetes may have heart disease even as early as 20 to 30 years of age.)
- Control your cholesterol level, blood pressure, and diabetes (if you have it).
• Have your blood cholesterol and triglyceride levels checked at least every 5 years and your blood pressure checked every 1 to 2 years beginning around age 20.

Birth Control and Heart Health

Taking birth control pills can increase the risk of heart disease among some women; particularly those with other risk factors such as smoking, diabetes, high blood pressure, or high cholesterol. Check with your doctor to see if you personally might be at greater risk for a heart attack if you take birth control pills.

Aspirin and Heart Health

Aspirin may help prevent heart attacks and may be of particular help to women at high risk, such as those who have already had a heart attack. Aspirin can have side effects and is not compatible with all other medications. Only take a daily aspirin after consulting with your doctor to be sure it is safe for you.

References:
• American Academy of Family Physicians
• Go Red for Women
• Heart Disease and Women (ADAM)
• MedlinePlus
• The National Women's Health Information Center