

Facts on Women and Heart Disease

- Heart disease is the leading cause of death for women in the United States, killing 292,188 women in 2009—that's **1 in every 4** female deaths.¹
- Although heart disease is sometimes thought of as a "man's disease," around the same number of women and men die each year of heart disease in the United States. Despite increases in awareness over the past decade, **only 54%** of women recognize that heart disease is their **number 1 killer**.²
- Heart disease is the **leading cause** of death for African American and white women in the United States. Among Hispanic women, heart disease and cancer cause roughly the same number of deaths each year. For American Indian or Alaska Native and Asian or Pacific Islander women, heart disease is second only to cancer.³
- About 5.8% of all white women, 7.6% of black women, and 5.6% of Mexican American women have coronary heart disease.⁴
- Almost **two-thirds** (64%) of women who die suddenly of coronary heart disease have **no previous symptoms**.⁴ Even if you have no symptoms, you may still be at risk for heart disease.

Symptoms

While some women have no symptoms, others experience angina (dull, heavy to sharp chest pain or discomfort), pain in the neck/jaw/throat or pain in the upper abdomen or back. These may occur during rest, begin during physical activity, or be triggered by mental stress.⁶

Women are more likely to describe chest pain that is sharp, burning and more frequently have pain in the neck, jaw, throat, abdomen or back.⁶

Sometimes heart disease may be silent and not diagnosed until a woman experiences signs or symptoms of a heart attack, heart failure, an arrhythmia,⁶ or stroke.

These symptoms may include

- **Heart Attack:** Chest pain or discomfort, upper back pain, indigestion, heartburn, nausea/vomiting, extreme fatigue, upper body discomfort, and shortness of breath.
- **Arrhythmia:** Fluttering feelings in the chest (palpitations).⁶
- **Heart Failure:** Shortness of breath, fatigue, swelling of the feet/ankles/legs/abdomen.

- **Stroke:** Sudden weakness, paralysis (inability to move) or numbness of the face/arms/legs, especially on one side of the body. Other symptoms may include: confusion, trouble speaking or understanding speech, difficulty seeing in one or both eyes, shortness of breath, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination, loss of consciousness, or sudden and severe headache.⁷

Risk Factors

High blood pressure, high LDL cholesterol, and smoking are key risk factors for heart disease.

About **half of Americans** (49%) have at least one of these three risk factors.⁵

Several other medical conditions and lifestyle choices can also put people at a higher risk for heart disease, including:

- Diabetes
- Overweight and obesity
- Poor diet
- Physical inactivity
- Excessive alcohol use

Screening

To reduce your chances of getting heart disease it's important to⁸

- Know your **blood pressure**. Having uncontrolled blood pressure can result in heart disease. High blood pressure has no symptoms so it's important to have your blood pressure checked regularly.
- Talk to your healthcare provider about whether you should be tested for **diabetes**. Having uncontrolled diabetes raises your chances of heart disease.
- **Quit smoking.**
- Discuss checking your **cholesterol and triglycerides** with your healthcare provider.
- Make **healthy food** choices. Being overweight and obese raises your risk of heart disease.
- **Limit alcohol** intake to one drink a day.
- **Lower your stress level** and find healthy ways to cope with stress.