

Splurge - Volume 4 Issue 7 (July 2009)

Article by: Joseph P. Galichia, MD, FACC

Interventional Cardiologist

Galichia Medical Group, PA

316-684-3838 / 800-657-7250

www.galichia.com

HEART ATTACKS AND WOMEN

Many women fear that breast cancer poses their greatest risk of dying. Studies have shown, however, that a woman has only about a 10% chance of dying of breast cancer but nearly a 50% chance of dying from heart disease. This is a statistic that is not well-known by many women. In fact, a recent survey of women revealed that only 43% were aware they had to be concerned with heart disease. The unfortunate truth is heart disease is the number one killer of women in the United States.

Historically, the risk of heart attack has always been associated with men. Even many healthcare professionals still perceive the typical heart attack in terms of men. In recent years, we have learned much more about different presentations of heart disease in men and women. Heart disease tends to occur about ten years later in women than in men; it seems that women are protected somewhat by estrogen production until they reach menopause. After that, the risk of heart disease continues to rise until it equals that of men in their sixties and seventies. In fact, slightly more women died of heart attacks last year than men in this country. It's been crucial for treatment and prevention to learn all we can about heart disease and its presentation in both genders.

We now know that women often present differently at the time of a heart attack which can create confusion, and may delay treatment. Men more commonly present with a "Hollywood heart attack" severe gripping chest pain in the center of the chest, sweating nausea, a feeling of weakness, difficulty breathing and a feeling of impending doom. Women may have other symptoms like pain in the arm or neck, shortness of breath, fatigue, a feeling of anxiety and profuse sweating. Many of these symptoms are not so dramatic in women; thus they often delay seeking treatment. Though there has been a rise for a longer period of heart attacks in women under the age of 45, when these women seek treatment, they are often evaluated for something other than heart disease. Many younger women fail to respond to their symptoms because they simply feel "this cannot be happening to me."

Family history is a definite risk in women, even more so if under the age of 45, and their mother developed heart disease in her early years. The common risk factors include obesity, diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, a sedentary lifestyle and smoking. Americans sometimes overlook women and heart disease because on average, women live longer than men, with a life expectancy of 80.3 years compared to 77.6 years for men. Women are generally better about preventive care and overall tend to be more compliant with follow-up for chronic diseases and more attentive to their own bodies.

There are other reasons why heart disease seems to be on the rise in women. One reason might be that many women who are now in their seventies and eighties smoked heavily in their younger years. It was quite chic during and after World War II for women to smoke, thus affecting the incidence of heart disease later in life. Smoking seems to take a greater toll on women than men in several ways: they are generally

smaller in stature, have smaller lung capacities, and usually have smaller coronary arteries that tend to clot. The protective effects of naturally produced estrogen diminishes when a women stops menstruating. It seems that hormone replacement, which was thought for many years to protect women from heart attacks, may indeed provide no protection and possibly even increase their risk for having vascular disorders. Additionally, many older women were not brought up with an emphasis on exercise. We now know that regular exercise can help prevent heart disease and slow the risk of heart attacks.

Many of the women in both the younger and older age groups have a history of heart disease in their family, particularly with the early onset of heart disease in their mothers. Family history is certainly a risk factor for heart disease and the presence of this problem in siblings increases the risk even further.

The American Heart Association in recent years has stressed the risk of heart disease in women with a Herculean effort to educate the American people about these risks. Here are some of the symptoms prior to and during a heart attack:

Symptoms BEFORE Heart Attack

Fatigue (71%)
Sleep disturbances (48%)
Shortness of breath (42%)
Indigestion (39%)
Anxiety (35%)

Symptoms DURING Heart Attack

Shortness of breath (58%)
Weakness (55%)
Fatigue (43%)
“Cold sweat” (39%)
Dizziness (39%)

Interestingly enough, in women, chest pain is often absent and a woman’s heart attack symptoms are more likely to be dismissed as anxiety or fatigue. That is why a greater awareness about reducing risk factors and gaining full knowledge of the atypical symptoms of a heart attack may prevent such an event in women. Pharmaceutical advances such as statin drugs that reduce cholesterol, various diagnostic tests and interventional procedures using medicated stents give promise to a better outlook for all women that encounter heart disease.

I encourage everyone, to pay attention to your body, and foster communication between you and your doctor. If you think you’re experiencing any of these symptoms, see your health care provider. As long as you understand the risk factors involved and how to alter some of these risk factors, you can seriously decrease your chances of suffering from heart disease.

Listen to Dr. Galichia’s Radio Show – “Take Your Health to Heart” every Saturday from 11 AM to Noon on 1480 KQAM in Wichita. If you have any medically related questions, please call us during the LIVE broadcast at 1-800-TALK-997 or 1-800-825-5997. You can also e-mail your questions anytime to GalichiaRadio@Galichia.com. We would love to hear from you!!!

Also heard in :

- Garden City - KIUL - AM 1240
- Scott City - KYUL - AM 1310
- Guymon, OK - KGYN - AM 1210
- Hutchinson - KWBW - AM 1450
- Pittsburg - KKOW - AM 860
- Parsons - KLKC - AM 1540
- Parsons - KLKC - FM 93.5
- Coffeyville - KGGF - AM 690
- Salina - KFRM - AM 550

www.galichiaradio.com