

CLUW News Health Tip

HEART DISEASE & WOMEN

A survey of more than a thousand American women found that the majority thought their greatest health risk was getting cancer. Public awareness campaigns have motivated women to get annual mammograms and PAP smears, and demand better diagnostic tests, treatment and research to prevent and cure cancer.

However, it is cardiovascular disease, which leads to heart attacks and strokes, that is the greatest health risk for women. Heart disease kills 50,000 more women than men each year. A total of 505,000 American women a year die of heart disease. In fact, one out of every two female deaths is due to heart disease or a stroke. Even, if a woman survives her first heart attack, she is more likely than a man to have a second heart attack within a year of the first one.

Gender differences in recognizing and treating heart disease have been brought to public attention by women cardiologists and other concerned health specialists. They point out that it is hard for the public to view heart disease as a women's issue when it has been viewed as a men's health problem for so long.

One of the problems is that symptoms of a heart attack in women are often much different than the symptoms experienced by men. The classic symptoms experienced by men may include severe pain and tightness in the center of the chest, pain in the shoulders and arms, and shortness of breath or difficulty breathing. Symptoms of heart attack in women may be similar, but they are often much more subtle. The pain may be so low in the chest that it is considered to be abdominal or stomach pain. Pain may be felt in the jaw, neck or back, and there may be nausea and extreme fatigue. Sometimes women wait too long to get to a doctor because they do not realize they are having a heart attack. Sometimes have been told they have the flu when they are experiencing a heart attack.

The most important thing one can do when a heart attack is suspected is to call the local emergency system, take an aspirin (to help prevent blood clots) and get to a doctor immediately.

It is important for women to have regular check-ups to detect risk factors and the need for treatment such as medications to lower blood pressure or cholesterol. Reducing the risk for heart attack is the same for both men and women. This includes a healthy diet, achieving a healthy weight, exercising, not smoking, and getting diabetes and high blood pressure under control.