

## Women and Heart Disease—Myths and the Hard Truth.

This article is a tribute to all the women who nurture us.

As I sit down to write this article, I am still thinking about a patient of mine, Andrea C- who I saw last week. Andrea is a wonderful 81-year-old woman who eats a healthy cardiac diet and exercises regularly. Although she has been able to continue 45 minutes of regular aerobic exercise, she had been experiencing chest discomfort regularly with severe exertion for two years. During this time she continued to care for, and nurture her husband through a severe stroke and recurrent falls, and she continues to enjoy helping with her grandchildren.

Andrea was a lucky woman. Her symptoms remained stable over the past couple of years and she did not experience a heart attack. After she left, I wondered, why did she wait so long to seek medical attention? Because Andrea, like most women, is a nurturer first. She put the needs of her husband and family ahead of her own life and like most women, had atypical symptoms.

While Andrea's case was a positive outcome, patients who ignore their own health to care for others is not a rare scenario. Most of the women patients I see come in with symptoms they have had for 6 months or more. During this time, they have continued to function as wives, mothers and daughters, many times making numerous visits to doctors' offices for and with their family members.

**So, how and why do women with cardiac issues wait so long to be seen??**

There are several MYTHS behind women's heart disease.

**Myth #1:** Heart attacks happen to men.

**Hard Truth:** 43 million American women have heart disease. Heart disease is the #1 killer of both men and women in the United States claiming nearly 420, 000 lives each year – That is approximately 1 death every minute.

Following a heart attack, approximately 1 in 4 women die within the first year compared to 1 in 5 men. And women are twice as likely to have a second heart attack within 6 years of the first compared to men.

**Myth #2:** Breast and uterine cancers are the biggest health concerns for women.

**Hard Truth:** Heart disease is the leading cause of death in women, and claims more lives than all forms of cancer *combined*. In the United States 1 in 30 women die from breast cancer and 1 in 3 die of heart disease. Breast cancer claims nearly 40,000 lives annually while cardiovascular disease (including heart attacks, heart failure, stroke and hypertension) claims the lives of nearly half a million women each year.

**Myth #3:** Heart attacks present as severe, unrelenting left-sided chest pain.

**Hard Truth:** Although chest pain or discomfort is the most common presenting feature of a heart attack, not everyone having a heart attack has typical left-sided chest pain--especially women. Women sometimes have heart attacks without any chest pain. They may experience a pressure or discomfort in the chest or upper abdomen with bloating, nausea and vomiting. They are also more likely to have associated symptoms like fatigue and shortness of breath- out of proportion to their activity level, lightheadedness, sweating, pain or discomfort in their throat, shoulder, arm or jaw or back. **BONUS HARD TRUTH: Up to two thirds women who experienced sudden cardiac death showed no previous symptoms.**

**Myth #4:** Only older post-menopausal women are at risk for heart disease.

**Hard Truth:** Out of 435,000 American women having heart attacks each year, 83,000 are under the age of 65 and 35,000 under 55. Women under the age of 50 are twice as likely to experience a fatal heart attack compared

to men.

### **What should women do to reduce their risk of having a heart attack?**

Know your risk -- Smoking, diabetes, high blood pressure, poorly controlled cholesterol levels, obesity, lack of physical exercise, emotional stress and a family history of heart disease all significantly increase a woman's risk of developing heart disease. Talk to your health care providers about your risk factors *and cardiac symptoms*. Engage a cardiologist who focuses on your specific needs. You are a unique patient who needs and deserves personalized, individual care from a physician who will listen to you, and get to know you by heart!

Before we end, I would like to share a wonderful piece of advice from a patient and friend of mine, Dawn Jasinski :

Remember 531.

- 5: Takes 5 minutes a day to relax and reflect on your life.
- 3: Write down 3 things you are grateful for every day.
- 1: Do something nice for someone else with a smile.

References: CDC.org; AHA.org; womensheart.org; goredforwomen.org; mayoclinic.org; All the combined wisdom from my patients, co-workers and colleagues