How to protect your heart - are women and men different?

GenCAD
**Being a woman or a man and having a heart disease**

Does it make a difference if you are a woman or a man when it comes to coronary artery disease and heart attack?

Doctors say it does, and it’s important to understand how it appears in women and men so you know what to look out for and how best to deal with it if you have it.

**Some risk factors for heart disease differ in women and men**

**Age:** Men develop coronary heart disease early, mainly in their sixties, and women in their seventies, but throughout their lives, both have the same risk for getting it.

**High blood pressure** is most common in young men and old women. High blood pressure causes more strokes and heart failure in women than in men.

**Diabetes** increases the risk of coronary heart disease more in women than in men. This makes women with diabetes high-risk patients who need intense treatment.

**High cholesterol levels** are equally dangerous and must be treated in both women and men.

Young women who **smoke** increase their risk for heart disease more than men. Smoking, being overweight and taking hormone therapy is a very dangerous combination.

**Depression and stress** are risk factors for women. They are often overlooked in men. Both must be treated by doctors.

Rheumatic diseases, like arthritis, and other **diseases of the immune system** cause heart disease more often in women than in men.

**Pregnancy:** Women who have high blood pressure during pregnancy – or preeclampsia – are more likely to develop heart disease and hypertension later in life and should have their blood pressure monitored after pregnancy.

**Erectile dysfunction** may be an early sign of coronary heart disease in men.

**Heart disease may differ in women and men**

**Large and small coronary arteries:** Men and older women usually have atherosclerosis (lipid deposits) in their large coronary arteries. Women before age 65 have more frequently spasms (cramps) of their coronary arteries or disease of the small vessels. This may lead to different symptoms.

**Stress induced heart disease:** Women after menopause may develop acute stress induced heart disease - severe chest pain that can mimic myocardial infarction. This condition is called broken heart syndrome and is rare in men. It is usually cured by medical treatment.

During and shortly after **pregnancy** very special acute forms of heart disease with severe chest pain may arise that require immediate medical attention.
Prevention in women and men

What can women and men do to reduce their risk of coronary heart disease?

Be aware - Don’t underestimate your risk. Women often do.

Know your normal values and take action if your values are higher:

Blood pressure: **optimal** <120/80 mmHg, pharmacotherapy is indicated when ≥140/90 mmHg

Blood glucose level: ≤100 mg/dl (5.6 mmol/l)

Blood lipid levels: LDL-Cholesterol ≤115 mg/dl,

Waist circumference: women ≤80 cm, men ≤94 cm

- **Stay healthy** - Adopt a healthy lifestyle to reduce your risk of coronary heart disease

- **Quit or don’t start smoking:** It is more difficult for women to stop smoking. Try to stop and get help if needed.

- **Exercise regularly:** Women and men can make big improvements to their heart health by exercising regularly. Take time (e.g. 30 minutes per day/ 5 days a week) for walking.

- **Eat a healthy diet:** Eat plenty of whole grains, a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, low-fat or fat-free dairy products, and lean meats. Avoid saturated or trans-fat, added sugars, and especially salt. Maintain a normal weight for optimal health and longevity.

- **Alcohol:** Limit your alcohol consumption.

Heart attack symptoms and help seeking in women and men

**Symptoms:**
The most common heart attack symptom in women and men is pain, pressure or discomfort in the chest. It is not always be the most prominent symptom.

Women with heart attacks frequently experience other symptoms, in addition to or without chest pain, such as:

- Neck, jaw, shoulder, upper back or abdominal discomfort
- Shortness of breath
- Pain in one or both arms
- Nausea or vomiting
- Sweating
- Light-headedness or dizziness
- Unusual fatigue

**Help seeking:** Because women often do not recognise they are having a heart attack, they tend to arrive later at hospitals than men.

Diagnosis of coronary heart disease

The tests doctors choose to diagnose chronic coronary artery disease can differ in women and men.

Exercise testing and coronary angiography is usually used in men and can be used in women if they have a number of risk factors and they can exercise sufficiently.

If women are younger, cannot exercise and have no other risk factors, alternative diagnostics may be preferred.
Managing heart disease may differ in women and men

**Drug therapy:**
High blood pressure and high blood lipids should be treated in both women and men. Aspirin does not prevent coronary heart disease in healthy women below 65 years. Hormone therapy after menopause does not prevent heart disease. Drugs may act differently in women and men and they may have different adverse effects. Adverse effects are more frequent in women and should be reported to the doctor. 

**What else can be done? — Interventions:**
Both women and men can benefit greatly from invasive therapy; e.g. catheters, balloon dilations, cardiac surgery and advanced pacemakers. However, women are treated less frequently. Talk to your doctor.

**Recovery and rehabilitation:**
Women take longer to recover than men after a heart attack or surgery. This may be due to the early resumption of household activities, family care, and missing out on cardiac rehabilitation. It’s important that both men and women go to cardiac rehabilitation.

**In a nutshell**
- Heart disease can manifest differently in women and men, in risks, symptoms, causes and diagnosis. Be aware - know your risk factors.
- Exercise regularly, eat a healthy diet, maintain a healthy weight, and quit or don’t start smoking. Be active.
- There are various ways to diagnose heart problems. Listen to options - protect yourself from delayed diagnosis.
- Best medications and doses may differ in women and men. Talk to your doctor.
- Both women and men benefit from cardiac interventions, surgery, pacemakers and cardiac rehabilitation.

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