

Symptoms of Heart Attack and Stroke

Cardiovascular disease, which includes coronary artery heart disease, stroke and peripheral arterial disease (PAD), is the leading cause of death of both American women and men. Statistics show that women and men have different outcomes from this disease. Women are more likely than men to die from a heart or stroke than men. However, a misperception still exists that cardiovascular disease is not a real problem for women.

Coronary Artery Disease (CAD)

CAD is a condition in which one more of the heart's arteries is narrowed or blocked by cholesterol plaque (called "atherosclerosis") thereby decreasing the blood flow to the heart muscle. Chest discomfort or pain (called "angina") can occur when the heart muscle does not receive adequate blood and oxygen, such as during exertion, strong emotions or extreme temperatures. The discomfort typically last less than ten minutes.

Typical angina symptoms, which usually occur in men, are:

- Uncomfortable pressure, fullness, squeezing or pain in the center of the chest
- Discomfort may radiate to the arms, jaw, neck and back

Atypical angina symptoms, which usually occur in women, include:

- Abdominal pain
- Shortness of breath
- Unexpected fatigue, dizziness, or weakness
- Nausea or Feeling of Indigestion
- Clamminess, cold sweats
- Anxiety
- Headache
- Back pain between shoulder blades

Women are more likely than men to have a hidden or subclinical type of CAD, which may cause only chest discomfort (rather than pain), minor EKG abnormalities or minor abnormal stress tests. This hidden type of heart disease does not involve the larger arteries supplying the heart (as is typical in men), but is due to disease of the small branches of the coronary arteries called the micro vessels. Frequently, normal arteries are found on angiograms of the heart in women.

Other causes of chest discomfort that are not related to the heart include acid reflux (heartburn or GERD), inflammation of the chest wall (costochondritis) or lung inflammation. If you have episodes of chest discomfort, you should see your physician for an evaluation.

Cerebral Vascular Accidents (CVA) or Stroke

CVA includes stroke and TIA (transient ischemic attack or ‘minor stroke’) and occurs when there is a sudden interruption in the blood supply and oxygen to the brain.

There are two main types of strokes:

- 1) **Ischemic** strokes are usually caused by sudden blockage in blood flow to a specific area of the brain. Most commonly a blood clot forms as a result of plaque rupture. If the clot is large it will block a major artery in the brain. If it is very small, transient symptoms called a “TIA” will result (see below). A blood clot can also travel from the heart to the brain due to atrial fibrillation (or A-Fib). 85% of strokes are ischemic.
- 2) **Hemorrhagic** strokes are due to bleeding from a ruptured blood vessel within the brain, frequently associated with high blood pressure.

Strokes affect individuals in different ways, depending on the type of stroke, the area of the brain affected and the extent of brain injury.

TIA’s or Transient Ischemic Attacks are “mini” strokes that produce stroke-like symptoms, but cause no lasting damage. The symptoms of a TIA last a few minutes to several hours and completely resolve within twenty-four hours. More than one half of people who experience a TIA will later have a stroke. Heeding the warning signs of TIA’s and treating the underlying risk factors for cardiovascular disease could prevent many strokes.

Stroke Warning Signs

- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg, usually on one side of the body
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination
- Sudden severe headache with no known cause.

Anyone who experiences the warning signs of stroke should Call 911, immediately, even if the symptoms are getting better or seem to disappear.