

Top Ten Things Women Should Know About Heart Disease

1. Heart disease is the leading cause of death of American women, killing more than a quarter of them.¹
2. You are your own best health advocate, and you know your body better than anyone. Insist your doctor or hospital staff takes your complaint seriously, does not make you wait, and gives you a thorough cardiac evaluation.¹
3. Women often experience atypical symptoms, or **different symptoms from men**, making it harder to know they are having a heart attack. If you think you are **experiencing heart attack symptoms**, immediately call 911 for an ambulance – do not drive to the hospital or wait for someone to go with you. Also, crush or chew a full-strength aspirin and swallow a glass of water to prevent further blood clotting.^{1 2}
4. Women may experience some or all of the following **symptoms of heart disease**: chest pain (angina); shortness of breath; pain, numbness, weakness or coldness in your legs or arms; heart flutters; dizziness, lightheadedness or fainting; nausea or vomiting; slow or racing heart beat; fatigue or weakness - especially with exertion; stomach or abdominal pain; pressure or pain that spreads to the shoulders, neck, upper back, jaw, or arms; and swelling of legs, ankles and feet.^{1 3}
5. Cardiovascular disease (CVD) does not only involve your heart. In many patients, blocked arteries reduce blood flow in the arteries of the limbs, kidneys and carotids. For many women, the first symptom of CVD is pain, cramps or tingling in the legs.⁴
6. There are **non-preventable risk factors** that might influence a woman's risk of heart disease, including: family history of early heart disease, age (55 or older), and race/ethnicity (African American, Hispanic and Native American women are at greater risk).¹
7. There are **preventable risk factors**, including: high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, diabetes, smoking (especially for women taking hormone-based contraceptives), being overweight and being physically inactive.¹
8. There are five key heart disease **prevention steps** you can take: don't smoke or use tobacco products, get regular exercise, eat a heart-healthy diet, maintain a healthy weight, and get regular health screenings.²
9. In preparation for a non-emergency doctor's visit, you should: write down symptoms you have been experiencing; list all medications, vitamins and supplements you are currently taking; write down family history of heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure or diabetes; be prepared to discuss diet and exercise; write down questions to ask your doctor.²
10. Several tests may be required to **determine your risk** of heart disease. These tests include: blood tests, electrocardiography (EKG or ECG), echocardiography, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), stress tests, computed tomographic angiography (CTA scan), ankle-brachial index test (ABI) and cardiac catheterization (angiogram).¹

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¹ WomenHeart: The National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease (www.womenheart.org)

² The Society for Cardiovascular Angiography and Interventions (www.seconds-count.org)

³ Mayo Clinic (www.mayoclinic.com)

⁴ The P.A.D. Coalition (www.padcoalition.org)