



Heart disease is the No. 1 cause of death for both men and women in the United States, but there's a common misperception that it's "a guy thing."

Women fear breast cancer more, even though they're eight times more likely to die of heart disease. "The message is getting out more, but women still need help understanding all their risk factors," says Pamela Ouyang, M.D., Director of the Johns Hopkins Women's Cardiovascular Health Center.

While women and men share many heart disease risk factors and symptoms, recent studies show what previous male-focused studies have not: Women have unique heart disease risk factors and symptoms.

Traditional risk factors common to both women and men:

- Obesity
- Smoking
- Diabetes—if you have diabetes, take it seriously. According to Johns Hopkins research, women under 60 who have diabetes have up to four times the risk of developing coronary artery disease as women without diabetes. Women notoriously take care of everybody else while minimizing their own health needs. Learn the warning signs of diabetes and take steps to get blood sugar under control.



- High blood pressure
- Family history
- Metabolic syndrome—the coexistence of high blood pressure, obesity, and high glucose and triglyceride levels
- High levels of C-reactive protein—a sign of inflammatory disease that can occur along with other cardiovascular risk factors

Some risk factors that relate specifically to women or that can affect women disproportionately include:

- High blood pressure and preeclampsia,

or diabetes, during pregnancy are associated with cardiovascular disease later in a woman's life.

- Relatively high testosterone levels after menopause
- Increasing hypertension following menopause
- Autoimmune diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis and systemic lupus erythematosus, which are more common in women than in men
- Stress and depression—they are three times more common among women



Lower the risk factors you can control

The first step to lower cardiovascular risk is to raise your awareness of the risk factors and symptoms particular to women. The next step is to take actions and practice daily behaviors that lower the risk factors you can control.

- Avoid smoking.
- Stick to a healthy, low-saturated-fat diet that is high in fiber and low in fatty, processed foods.

- Exercise regularly for benefits including lower blood pressure, lower risk of diabetes, healthier body weight, and stress reduction.
- Several times each week, follow a supervised exercise regimen that is both challenging and motivating. Cardiologists recommend exercising for at least 30 minutes at least three times per week. Even better, build up to 45 minutes or more four to six times per week.
- Consult with your physician about cardiovascular screening based on your family history and risk factors.
- Keep track of your cholesterol.
- Depression and rheumatoid arthritis are two conditions that affect women more frequently than men, increasing your risk of heart disease.



Pamela Ouyang offers specific recommendations on the following topics:

1. Believing You'll "Know" When You Need to Get Your Blood Pressure Checked

It's great to be in tune with your body, but that approach alone has its limits. "Women often tell me, 'I got dizzy, so I knew my blood pressure was high.' You won't know when you have high blood pressure or high cholesterol—these are silent conditions," Ouyang says.

How to proceed: Get your blood pressure, blood cholesterol, and blood sugar measured regularly by your doctor. They can flag your risk for future heart trouble.

2. Installing an Exercise Bike in the Home

Having a bike or treadmill is great. Trouble is, you must use it often, and that's where many women go wrong. They decide to embark on a new exercise program that's not fun, natural, or convenient—and so, after an initial push, they slack off.

How to proceed: Pick an activity that's fun for you so you'll want to do it often, like walking around the mall or running with a friend.

3. Smoking to Keep Weight Down

Keeping your weight in a normal range is great for your heart, but using cigarettes for weight control snuffs out those good effects. That's because smoking is a major cause of cardiovascular disease.

How to proceed: Control your weight with diet and exercise. Don't count on e-cigarettes either. "They may not be as healthy as initially hoped—it's still nicotine," Ouyang says.

4. Not Knowing the Warning Signs of Heart Trouble for You

Heart attack can present differently in women than it does in men. Expecting a chest-crushing episode, women ignore other danger signs.

How to proceed: If you notice nausea, abdominal pain, difficulty breathing or other bothersome symptoms that are unusual for you, it's important to consult with your doctor.

5. Avoiding Hormone Replacement Therapy at Menopause Because It's Bad for the Heart

Some women suffer unnecessarily through intense hot flashes and sleep disturbances. While it's no longer believed that hormone replacement therapy can protect the heart at menopause, that doesn't mean you need to avoid it. "For most women in their 50s, the established cardiovascular risk is low, and it's safe to take hormones," Ouyang says.

How to proceed: If you need to, take hormones for menopausal symptom relief. Try a prescription at the lowest possible dose for the shortest period of time you can.

6. Thinking Certain Health Problems of Pregnancy Ended with Your Child's Birth

Your baby may no longer be inside you, but your heart, arteries, and other organs still are. If you have diabetes that developed during pregnancy, gestational diabetes, or hypertensive disease of pregnancy, such as gestational hypertension or preeclampsia, your risk for heart problems is much greater later in life, Ouyang says.

How to proceed: Always inform a new doctor of your full health history so that he or she has the information necessary to consider your individual needs.

Symptoms of heart disease in women do not always include the "classic" angina or chest pain. That is why it is important to pay attention to your body and ask questions of your health provider.



Heart disease takes the lives of **six times** as many women as breast cancer, making it the **leading** cause of death.



Men develop symptoms of heart disease **10 years earlier**, on average, than women do.

A significant challenge for diagnosing women with heart disease is the lack of recognition of symptoms that might be related to heart disease or that don't fit into classic definitions. Women can develop symptoms that are subtler and harder to detect as a heart attack, especially if the physician is only looking for the "usual" heart attack symptoms.

According to cardiologist Lili Barouch, M.D., Assistant Professor of Medicine at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, "Women are much more likely to have atypical heart attack symptoms, such as indigestion, shortness of breath, and back pain, sometimes even in the absence of obvious chest discomfort."