

Women & cardiovascular disease

Heart disease is the number one killer of women and more than 8.6 million women die of cardiovascular disease (CVD) (including heart disease and stroke) around the world each year.¹ This represents one-third of all deaths among women.^{1, 2}

The risk of dying or becoming seriously unwell due to heart disease and stroke is largely underestimated in women.³

Heart attacks claim the lives of 3.3 million women every year, with another 3.2 million women dying from stroke and the remaining 2.1 million women succumbing to rheumatic heart disease, heart failure, hypertensive heart disease, inflammatory heart disease, and other CVD.¹

In low- and middle-income countries, women who develop CVD are more likely to die from it than women in industrialized nations.⁴ For example, in South Africa, the proportion of CVD deaths in women aged between 35–59 years is 150 per cent higher than that of women in the United States. While in Brazil, the proportion of CVD deaths in women aged between 35–59 years is 75 per cent higher than women in the US.⁴

Cardiovascular disease: not just a man's disease

CVD does not just affect men, and in some instances its effects can be worse in women.

- Younger women who have a heart attack have higher mortality than men of the same age.²
- Women are more likely than men to become disabled by stroke.²
- Women with diabetes have higher CVD mortality rates than men with diabetes.²
- Women in low- and middle-income countries fare worse than men, experiencing a higher proportion of CVD deaths than men.⁵

Under-recognition of the risk in women and under-treatment

Women do not perceive CVD as the greatest threat to their health.

- Young women still feel more threatened by cancer than they do by CVD.⁶
- Some of the symptoms in women can be different to that in men and as a result they are often under-diagnosed and under-treated when compared to men.

Risk factors in women

Risk factors for heart disease and stroke are largely the same for men and women. Factors such as age and family history play a role, but it is estimated that the majority of CVD deaths are due to modifiable risk factors such as smoking, high cholesterol, unhealthy diet, high blood pressure, obesity, or diabetes.

- Women who smoke double the risk of stroke. The more cigarettes smoked, the higher the risk.⁷
- Exposure to second-hand smoke increases the risk of dying from heart disease by 15 per cent in women.⁸
- Women with high blood pressure have 3.5 times the risk of developing coronary heart disease compared to women with normal blood pressure.⁹

Prevention of cardiovascular disease in women

Women, like men, need to take preventive action to manage their risk factors. This includes monitoring their blood pressure and taking appropriate steps to control high blood pressure; monitoring blood glucose levels; eating healthily; avoiding tobacco; and participating in regular physical activity. Indeed:

- Physical activity can reduce the risk of CVD among women in a dose-response fashion. Inactive women would benefit by even slightly increasing their physical activity – for example by walking one hour per week or possibly less – and would benefit more from additional activity.¹⁰
- Young women can significantly reduce their risk of developing CVD by consuming more fish; researchers found that the risk of CVD was three times lower in women of child-bearing age who frequently ate fish one or more times per week compared with women who never ate fish.¹¹

Go Red for Women campaign

Go Red for Women is an international awareness campaign dedicated to the prevention, diagnosis and control of CVD in women. The American Heart Association created the Go Red for Women campaign in 2004 to empower women with the knowledge and tools to take charge of their heart health. The World Heart Federation, together with more than 40 of its member organizations, has taken the campaign global to bring attention to the fact that CVD is the number one killer of women and the steps that can be taken to prevent it.

Working with members around the world, the World Heart Federation also urges women to know their numbers – have blood pressure, cholesterol and glucose levels checked regularly, as high levels can place them at greater risk. www.worldheart.org/grfw

References

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