- Heart attack

HEALTH



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HOW TO SURVIVE A HEART ATTACK

Even if you're not positive that it's happening ("It's probably just heartburn"), acting quickly and demanding to be taken seriously can make all the difference.

BY BETH HOWARD

HEALTH

HEART DISEASE IS THE NUMBER ONE KILLER OF WOMEN IN AMERICA—

it takes down more women than breast cancer or COVID, more than car accidents or Alzheimer's disease. But even if you've heard this before, you might find yourself in complete disbelief should a cardiac event happen to you.

"We don't tell women enough about their risk for heart issues—plus, women are often busy taking care of others, and sometimes the symptoms aren't the classic ones they hear about," says Martha Gulati, M.D., associate director of the Barbra Streisand Women's Heart Center at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. "This sometimes makes it hard for women to even think it might be their heart."

The result is missed opportunities to save our own lives: Women have the same risk of heart attacks as do men, but they're twice as likely to die from them. So don't leave your survival to luck, and don't be afraid of making a fuss or wasting anyone's time when you seek emergency help. "We would rather evaluate you and say 'This is not a heart attack' than have you die at home worrying about anyone being mad at you," says Dr. Gulati. Here, ways to improve your odds.

1 Know the symptoms.

While having a heart attack, three-quarters of people (both men and women) experience chest pain, tightness, or heaviness. But women often have additional symptoms like nausea, sweating, a feeling of being unwell, and fatigue. You could mistake these atypical signs for indications of a panic attack, chronic stress, or sleeplessness. "Heart attack is a great mimic," says Harlan M. Krumholz, M.D., a cardiologist and health care researcher at Yale University who authored a study on this issue.

Research shows that 85% of women 55 and younger who have had heart attacks experienced other symptoms—which could include unusual

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fatigue, sleep disturbances, anxiety, and arm weakness or pain—weeks or months before the event. So think back, and pay attention to your Spidey sense when you feel as if there's something wrong, says Dr. Krumholz.

2 Call 911.

If you notice symptoms, move quickly. One study found that it took women an average of an hour to call emergency services compared with 45 minutes for men, and minutes really do count. After you call 911, chew an aspirin to help prevent blood clots until you can receive proper treatment, advises cardiologist Dara Lee Lewis, M.D., codirector of the Women's Program at the Lown Cardiovascular Center in Boston. Then, if you are indoors, unlock the door in case you pass out before help arrives (while it is highly unlikely that this will happen to you, it's always best to be prepared).

Try not to worry about those who depend on you right now—a surprising number of women hesitate to seek help for this reason. "Women still bear a disproportionate burden of responsibility for their parents and children, and that often gets in their heads," says Dr. Krumholz. "But as they tell you in an airplane, it will be far worse if you don't put the oxygen mask on yourself first."



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3 Don't drive yourself to the hospital—or let others drive you.

"People think it will just be easier [to drive themselves]," says Dr. Lewis. "But it's a bit of Russian roulette." Here's why: In the first 24 hours after a heart attack, there's a small but real chance that you could become unstable, she says, and if that happens it's better for you to be in an ambulance than in a car. "You need to be in the care of medical professionals," Dr. Lewis adds. Ambulances often have electrocardiogram (EKG) machines, which can detect whether you're having a heart attack, and medications to stabilize you if you become sicker.

"If you are having a heart attack, EMTs can also call ahead to get the ball rolling, and the hospital team will be ready to whisk you to the cardiac catheterization lab if you need it," says Dr. Lewis. "The sooner they can get you there and open the blocked artery, the more likely you are to avoid permanent damage to your heart."

4 Speak up—loudly.

Gender bias keeps some medical providers from recognizing when a woman is having a heart attack. A recent study showed that women 55 and younger waited an average of 95 minutes after arriving at the hospital to be treated, versus 80 minutes for men. At the hospital, you should immediately receive an EKG (if you haven't already had one) and a blood test for troponin, an enzyme that indicates that the heart muscle has suffered damage.

If providers are slow to consider the possibility that you're experiencing a cardiac event, Dr. Krumholz says, "be clear and assertive about your symptoms and fears. Don't worry about being a problem patient. Say, 'I think I'm having a heart attack, and I need an EKG.'" Don't downplay your symptoms (for example, "It's probably just gas"), advises Dr. Lewis. "Advocate for yourself as you might for a beloved friend or sister."

5 Put a copy of this article on the fridge!

We're serious: Clear off some of those takeout menus and expired coupons, put this front and center, and read it from time to time. It could save your life.

The American Heart Association has updated its screening guidelines for women. Read more at prevention.com/heart-disease-risk-factors.

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