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Heart Disease is a Bigger Threat to Women than Cancer

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Females may have cardiovascular disease and not know it!

Carrie Fisher's heart attack a few months ago reminds us that heart disease affects women and men. The beloved actress passed away at the age of 60. Many were surprised because heart attacks are usually associated with men. However, professor of cardiology and population health at Hofstra Northwell School of Medicine [Dr. Jennifer Mieres](#) explains that, "Heart disease is the number one killer of women and is more deadly than all forms of cancer combined."

Further, more than one in three women (about 43 million) live with cardiovascular disease, and many are not aware of their condition!

[Statistics from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) report no previous symptoms in almost two-thirds of women who died from heart disease suddenly.

In the past, so much research about heart health was geared towards men that doctors lacked information to properly diagnose and treat females. Women do not experience the same symptoms as men, which is why [Harvard Medical School](#) trained cardiologist [Dr. Paula Johnson](#) established one of the country's first facilities focused on heart disease in women.

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While severe chest pain that radiates down one arm has been reported in women, their symptoms may also be “silent”, or self-diagnosed as other minor health issues. The Harvard School of Public Health found that [women dismiss heart disease warning signs more than men](#). A Heart and Stroke Foundation team at HSPH attributed the behavior to “optimism bias” – “thinking they’re less at risk for bad health outcomes than they really are. This bias may keep them from seeking timely medical attention and could worsen their condition.”

WebMD lists out the [six common heart attack symptoms in women](#):

1. *Stomach pain*
2. *Shortness of breath, nausea, or lightheadedness*
3. *Sweating*
4. *Fatigue*
5. *Chest pain or discomfort*
6. *Pain in your arm(s), back, neck, or jaw*

Risk factors including smoking, diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure and obesity affect both sexes, but these conditions are more dangerous for females. Additionally, heart attacks among women seem to increase a decade after menopause. Other risks unique to women include inflammatory diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, pre-term births, pregnancy complications, and menopause before the age of 50.

While one or more heart disease risk factors are present in 90% of women, 80% can be controlled by regular exercise, healthy diet and weight maintenance. Being well informed and attentive to heart disease symptoms may also help mitigate the number of deaths among women annually. Cardiovascular disease has claimed a third fewer women since the Heart Association’s [Go Red for Women](#) campaign started raising awareness among women.

Thanks to technology, it is now easier than ever to find updated information to keep ourselves healthy. During heart health month, please take the time—especially women—to learn more about keeping your heart healthy, know the warning signs and schedule a cardiovascular screening with your doctor.

Co-authored with Shane Power, President of [Watertree Health](#), where Lisa works in communication and business development.