

# UW Health: Heart disease a leading cause of death for women, despite perception that it primarily affects men

Posted on Friday, Feb 24, 2023

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MADISON, Wis. – In Wisconsin, Illinois and across the United States approximately 60 million women are affected by heart disease, even though it is often thought of as primarily impacting men.

In fact, one in five women dies of heart disease, according to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention data.

The perception that heart disease, specifically heart attacks, is an issue mainly affecting men has a long history in society that exists even in the medical community, according to Dr. Aga Silbert, cardiologist, UW Health, and clinical assistant professor of medicine, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health.

“Early on, many clinical studies on heart disease excluded women which impacted the available data on the number of women with this condition,” she said. “Even in medical textbooks heart attack is illustrated by an image of a man clutching his chest.”

Most symptoms of heart disease or a heart attack are similar for women and men, including chest tightness, feeling weak and shortness of breath. A person could also break out into a cold sweat or have pain or discomfort in the jaw, neck, back, one or both arms or shoulders. However, women might uniquely experience unusual or unexplained tiredness and nausea, according to the CDC. And, unlike men, women

frequently do not get warning signs or symptoms prior to a heart attack, Silbert said.

If someone does experience these symptoms, especially if they have not had these sensations before, they should call 911 immediately, Silbert said.

“Every second counts in preserving heart function, so by calling for help right away you are increasing your odds of a better recovery,” she said.

Heart Month, which is February, is a great time to remind people that heart disease is reversible and preventable, according to Silbert.

“Prevention starts in childhood with eating healthy food and physical activity, and as we get older, we can avoid things like smoking, drinking alcohol and using drugs, while maintaining a healthy lifestyle,” she said. “And the good news is, even if you have or had some unhealthy habits, incorporating positive changes into your lifestyle can reverse the damage that may have been done or prevent future complications.”

Additionally, many people have a family history of heart disease to consider when making lifestyle choices, Silbert said.

“If you know a family member has had a heart attack or stroke at a younger age, tell your primary care provider and talk about what steps you can take to mitigate your risk of a future cardiac event,” she said.

In Madison, the reality of heart disease for women is evident. In 2022, more women than men visited the UW Health emergency departments for chest pain; about 3,075 compared to about 2,930 men. However, it should be noted that not all patients who have cardiac symptoms have chest pain, and not all chest pain is caused by heart symptoms.

Silbert is available for interviews today, and a recorded interview with Silbert is also available.