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Heart Disease No. 1 Killer of Women

Dr. Robert Martin advises women to know symptoms and risk factors

KNOXVILLE, TN – (August 12, 2013) Although many people think of heart disease as a man's problem, women can and do get heart disease. In fact, heart disease is the leading cause of death for women in the United States. It is also a leading cause of disability among women.

“Many women mistakenly believe that cancer is more of a threat to their health than heart disease,” said Robert O. Martin, M.D., a board-certified cardiologist with East Tennessee Heart Consultants at Physicians Regional Medical Center. “A survey conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics showed that 65 percent of women perceive cancer to pose the greatest threat to their health, with 46 percent of women identifying breast cancer as their most serious health concern.

“In reality, based on incidence, heart disease ranks as the number one health threat for women, and is more deadly than all forms of cancer combined,” Dr. Martin said. “While one in 31 American women dies from breast cancer each year, one in four dies of heart disease.”

The most recent report published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lists heart disease as the leading cause of death in females for 2009 at 24 percent. All cancers combined accounted for 22 percent of deaths in women.

According to Dr. Martin, the most common cause of heart disease is narrowing or blockage of the coronary arteries, the blood vessels that supply blood to the heart itself. This is called coronary artery disease and happens slowly over time. It is the major reason people have heart attacks.

Dr. Martin advises women to know their risk factors for heart disease as well as the symptoms of a heart attack. “A lot of people are unaware that heart attack symptoms in women can be quite different from men’s. Knowing the warning signs—and getting immediate, appropriate care—is the single most important thing you can do to lessen the damage of a heart attack,” he said.

Heart Attack Warning Signs

For both women and men, the most common sign of a heart attack is:

- Pain or discomfort in the center of the chest. It can be mild or strong. It can last more than a few minutes, or it can go away and come back.

Other common signs of a heart attack include:

- Pain or discomfort in the back, shoulders, neck, arm or jaw
- Shortness of breath

- Nausea or vomiting
- Feeling faint or woozy
- Breaking out in a cold sweat

Women are more likely than men to have these other common signs of a heart attack, particularly shortness of breath, nausea or vomiting, and pain in the back, neck or jaw. Women are also more likely to have less common signs of a heart attack, which may be nonspecific, including:

- Loss of appetite
- Feeling tired or weak

“For women, heart attack symptoms are often more subtle than the obvious crushing pain associated with heart attacks,” Dr. Martin said.

“Some women may arrive in the ER after heart damage has already occurred because their symptoms are not those typically associated with a heart attack,” he added. “If you think you’re having a heart attack, dial 9-1-1 immediately. The longer it takes to get treated, the more heart muscle that will be damaged.”

The older a woman gets, the more likely she is to get heart disease. But women of all ages should be concerned. “It’s important to know the risk factors and make lifestyle changes to reduce the chance of suffering a life-threatening heart attack,” Dr. Martin said.

Heart Disease Risk Factors

Although the traditional risk factors for heart disease (such as family history and obesity) affect both women and men, other factors also may play a significant role in the development of heart disease in women. For example:

- Metabolic syndrome (a combination of fat around your abdomen, high blood pressure, high blood sugar and high triglycerides)
- Low levels of estrogen after menopause
- Smoking

According to Dr. Martin, there are several lifestyle changes you can make to reduce your risk. For example:

- Maintain a healthy weight
- Exercise at least 30 minutes a day on most days
- Eat a diet that’s low in saturated fat, cholesterol and salt
- Quit or don’t start smoking

“You can’t control risk factors such as family history, but you can do things to mitigate your risk for heart disease,” he said. “The number one thing any woman can do for her health is to quit smoking.

“Women are terrific caretakers of the men and children in their lives,” Dr. Martin added. “I urge my female patients to be just as vigilant with their own health. Keep your routine doctor’s appointments so you can have a healthcare professional regularly evaluate important measurements gleaned from history, physical and lab tests. This is how, as your physician, I can guide you preventively to good cardiovascular health and a long, productive life.”

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