Women and heart attacks

We’ve known for a while that men are from Mars and women are from Venus, but we are just now learning that the sexes are different in another respect: how they experience heart attacks.

A woman’s symptoms of heart attack can be dramatically different from a man’s and, in fact, less dramatic. Perhaps this is the reason women have more unrecognized heart attacks than men and are more often misdiagnosed in EDs and sent home!

Both sexes often experience these symptoms of heart attack:
✦ Pressure or a squeezing pain in the center of the chest which may spread to the neck, shoulder or jaw
✦ Light-headedness, fainting, sweating, nausea or shortness of breath

Many women – 43% of them, in fact – never experience acute chest pain during a heart attack. Many do have shortness of breath, but they may also experience unexplained fatigue or pressure in the lower chest which can be mistaken as a stomach problem.

Unusual fatigue, nausea, dizziness, discomfort that feels like indigestion, back pain – these symptoms are not uncommon for a woman having a heart attack. It’s also worth noting that some women – about six weeks before the actual heart attack – have shortness of breath, unexplained fatigue or stomach pain as an early warning sign that they might have a blocked artery.

If you believe you’re having a heart attack symptom, dial 911 immediately for an ambulance to take you to the ED.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we wear red this month to honor the hearts of the women in our lives: mothers, grandmothers, sisters, daughters, co-workers and friends. Be with them each and every day. Amen.


Practical Guide to the Health Care System:
The benefits of having a medical home

Many people have a usual source for health care. They go to this source whenever they have new health problems, need preventive care or seek recommendations for referrals.

Establishing an ongoing relationship with a physician is wise. Selecting a doctor when you are in urgent need of care can be exhausting, frustrating and overwhelming.

A doctor who knows you because he/she has seen you over the course of several years has a knowledge of you that is far more than skin deep. That physician has insights into your existing conditions, your history and your personality.

He/she has a baseline of knowledge that is both objective and subjective. That doctor knows what is normal for you and what is abnormal for you, how much stress you experience in your work, the dynamics of your family and how to best work with you to improve your well-being.

Having a regular physician has a beneficial effect on many health care services, including preventive services for children and reductions in hospital use among patients with chronic problems. Diabetics who had standing relationships with their doctors were more likely to follow a diabetic diet, monitor their sugars and receive recommended preventive exams.

Over time, deep trust develops between doctor and patient. Honest answers – even to hard questions – become easier to speak. Communicating about pain and needs becomes less awkward. Shame disappears.

A doctor who knows the patient well serves the patient best. Simply having an ongoing relationship with a physician can mean greater wellness for you and your loved ones.

Resources: 1-800-3-ADVOCATE or Advocatehealth.com • findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov

Coming in March: How to select a primary care physician