

Are There Women Specific Heart Diseases?

YES!

Heart disease in women can present differently than in men, and there are some unique heart-related conditions or variations in how heart disease manifests in women. Here are a few examples of heart conditions that are more prominent or unique to women:

SPONTANEOUS CORONARY ARTERY DISSECTION (SCAD)

- **Overview:** SCAD is a rare and potentially life-threatening condition where the inner layer of a coronary artery tears, disrupting blood flow to the heart and leading to a heart attack. It can also cause arrhythmias or sudden cardiac arrest.
- **Prevalence in Women:** SCAD is a condition whose average age range is between 45 to 53 but can occur at any age. However, SCAD is the number one cause of heart attacks in pregnant and postpartum women and approximately 90% of SCAD patients are female.
- **Symptoms:** SCAD can present with more obvious heart attack symptoms like chest pain, shortness of breath, and fatigue. However, it can be misdiagnosed or missed because it doesn't always show up in the same way as a traditional heart attack.
- **Risk Factors:** Hormonal changes during pregnancy, delivery, postpartum and menopause are all considered risk factors for SCAD. Connective tissue disorders such as Fibromuscular Dysplasia, Ehlers-Danlos, and Marfan can also increase one's risk. Extreme emotional or physical stress is also considered to be a contributing factor to SCAD and its recurrence.
- **Diagnosis and Treatment:** Initial diagnosis of SCAD is conducted with bloodwork, an electrocardiogram and a coronary angiogram. Other imaging techniques such as ultravascular ultrasound (IVUS) and optical coherence tomography (OCT) are used for confirmation, follow up and with suspected subsequent SCADs. The goal of treatment with SCAD is to restore blood flow to the heart, manage chest pain and prevent it from happening again. In most cases, the dissection is left to heal medically. More invasive treatment such as stents or bypass surgery are reserved for more severe, life-threatening cases.

MICROVASCULAR DISEASE (MVD)

- **Overview:** Microvascular disease involves the tiny blood vessels that supply the heart muscle. Unlike traditional coronary artery disease, which affects larger coronary arteries, microvascular disease affects the smaller arteries and can impair blood flow to the heart.
- **Prevalence in Women:** This condition is more common in women, especially postmenopausal women, and those with diabetes or high blood pressure. Women often develop this condition at a younger age compared to men.
- **Symptoms:** Women with microvascular disease may experience chest pain (angina) and other symptoms that mimic those of a heart attack. However, because the disease affects small vessels, it doesn't always show up on standard imaging tests like angiograms, making it difficult to diagnose.
- **Risk Factors:** High cholesterol, hypertension, diabetes, and smoking can increase the risk of microvascular disease. Additionally, women who are obese or who have a family history of heart disease are at higher risk.
- **Diagnosis and Treatment:** It's often diagnosed using specialized imaging techniques like a coronary flow reserve test or a myocardial perfusion scan. Treatment may involve medications like nitrates, beta-blockers, or ACE inhibitors to improve blood flow and reduce symptoms.

TAKOTSUBO CARDIOMYOPATHY (BROKEN HEART SYNDROME)

- **Overview:** Takotsubo cardiomyopathy, also known as broken heart syndrome, is a temporary heart condition often triggered by extreme stress, such as emotional trauma, a breakup, or the death of a loved one. It mimics the symptoms of a heart attack but is not caused by blocked arteries.
- **Prevalence in Women:** Postmenopausal women are more likely to experience this condition, but not exclusive. It is believed to be related to a sudden surge of stress hormones like adrenaline, which temporarily weakens the heart muscle.
- **Symptoms:** Symptoms are similar to a heart attack: chest pain, shortness of breath, and fatigue. However, unlike a heart attack, the coronary arteries are not blocked.
- **Risk Factors:** Emotional stress, physical stress, or serious health events such as surgery, can trigger this condition. It's more common in women over 50.
- **Diagnosis and Treatment:** Diagnosis involves ruling out a heart attack (since symptoms are similar) through blood tests and imaging like echocardiograms. The heart often recovers fully within a few weeks with appropriate treatment, which may include medications for heart failure or beta-blockers to manage stress levels.

PREGNANCY-RELATED HEART CONDITIONS:

Peripartum Cardiomyopathy:

- **Overview:** Peripartum cardiomyopathy is a form of heart failure that can develop in the last month of pregnancy or up to five months postpartum. It involves the heart's inability to pump blood effectively and can be life-threatening.
- **Risk Factors:** Older maternal age, multiple pregnancies, preeclampsia, carrying multiples (twins or triplets), and/or gestational diabetes all increase the risk of peripartum cardiomyopathy.
- **Symptoms:** Shortness of breath, fatigue, swelling in the legs, and rapid heart rate.
- **Diagnosis and Treatment:** Diagnosis involves echocardiograms to assess heart function. Treatment may include heart failure medications, including ACE inhibitors, beta-blockers, and diuretics, along with lifestyle modifications.

Gestational Hypertension & Preeclampsia:

- **Overview:** Gestational hypertension is high blood pressure that occurs during pregnancy. Preeclampsia is a more serious condition that involves high blood pressure along with damage to organs such as the kidneys and liver. Both conditions increase the risk of future cardiovascular disease.
- **Risk Factors:** First-time pregnancy, obesity, a family history of preeclampsia, carrying multiples and gestational diabetes all must be considered.
- **Symptoms:** High blood pressure, protein in the urine, headaches, and swelling in the hands and feet.
- **Diagnosis and Treatment:** Close monitoring of blood pressure is essential. Treatment may include medication to control blood pressure and prevent complications, with early delivery of the baby sometimes required in severe cases.

PREECLAMPSIA AND FUTURE HEART RISK

- **Overview:** Women who experience preeclampsia during pregnancy are at a higher risk for cardiovascular disease later in life, including hypertension, stroke, and coronary artery disease. Preeclampsia causes long-term damage to blood vessels and increases the risk of atherosclerosis (plaque buildup in arteries).
- **Risk Factors:** Women with a history of preeclampsia, especially those who delivered prematurely or had severe cases, should be monitored for heart health in the years following pregnancy.
- **Diagnosis and Treatment:** Blood pressure monitoring and lifestyle changes such as improved diet, exercise, and weight management can help mitigate risks. Regular screenings for heart disease may also be recommended.

WHY HEART SYMPTOMS ARE OFTEN OVERLOOKED IN WOMEN

The myriad of potential symptoms listed above can be indicative of other conditions that may be unwittingly (or knowingly) assigned to women such as; acid reflux disease, anxiety or influenza.

As a result, this may lead women and their loved ones to downplay or dismiss symptoms and for healthcare providers to miss or mis-diagnose them.

ENDOMETRIOSIS AND HEART DISEASE

- **Overview:** Endometriosis is a chronic condition where tissue similar to the lining of the uterus grows outside it, leading to pain and other symptoms. Some research suggests that women with endometriosis may be at higher risk for cardiovascular diseases later in life due to ongoing inflammation and hormonal imbalances.
- **Risk Factors:** Chronic inflammation and hormonal changes associated with endometriosis may contribute to vascular damage and atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries).
- **Diagnosis and Treatment:** Cardiovascular health should be closely monitored in women with endometriosis, and treatments for heart disease may include lifestyle changes, medication, and in some cases, surgery for both conditions

AUTOIMMUNE DISEASES AND HEART DISEASE

- **Overview:** Conditions like lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, and scleroderma, which are more common in women, are linked to an increased risk of heart disease due to the chronic inflammation they cause. Inflammation can damage blood vessels and lead to the development of atherosclerosis.
- **Risk Factors:** Women with autoimmune conditions may have higher levels of inflammation and a tendency to develop clotting disorders, both of which can increase the risk of cardiovascular disease.
- **Diagnosis and Treatment:** Women with autoimmune diseases should be regularly screened for cardiovascular risk factors, including high blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and blood sugar. Treatment focuses on managing the underlying autoimmune condition while also addressing cardiovascular risk factors.

HORMONAL CHANGES AND HEART DISEASE

- **Overview:** Estrogen has a protective effect on heart health, and its decline during menopause increases the risk of cardiovascular disease. This is particularly true in women who have additional risk factors like high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or diabetes.
- **Symptoms:** After menopause, women may experience changes in cholesterol, increased blood pressure, and weight gain, all of which can contribute to a higher risk of heart disease.
- **Diagnosis and Treatment:** Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) may be considered to manage menopause symptoms, but its role in heart health is still debated. Lifestyle changes, such as a heart-healthy diet, exercise, and blood pressure management, are crucial for reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease.

Take Action Today!

Advocating for your heart health starts with understanding heart disease and other conditions that affect your cardiovascular system. Learn your numbers, follow your care plan, and work closely with your healthcare team. Small, consistent steps can make a big difference for your long-term heart health.

Additional Information for Women:

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Life
IN HEARTS



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Canada's patient-led heart disease charity
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Our Mission

The HeartLife Foundation is a patient-driven charity whose mission is to transform the quality of life for people living with cardiovascular diseases by engaging, educating, and empowering a global community. We aim to create lasting solutions, drive innovation, and build healthier lives for patients, caregivers, and families worldwide.