



## **Women and Heart Disease**

by Kalpana (Rose) M. Kumar M.D.

When asked what a well-educated woman considers her greatest health hazard, 9 out of 10 times her answer will be breast cancer.

Heart disease is actually the nation's number one killer, causing more deaths than all cancers combined. Women account for 51 % of all cardiac deaths per year in the U.S. *It is the leading cause of death in women age 20 and greater.* The fastest growing users of prescription drugs for heart disease are men and women, ages 29 to 44. Among women, however, there is no improvement in mortality. In fact, their mortality rate has been rising over the past ten years.

The primary risk factors for heart disease are hypertension, diabetes, obesity, cigarette smoking, elevated cholesterol, inactivity, depression, heredity, and age. In women, a low HDL cholesterol rather than a high LDL cholesterol (higher male risk factor), appears to render her more vulnerable to heart disease. Hypertension has long been recognized as the leading contributor to cardiovascular disease, including stroke and heart attacks. Hypertensive individuals are two to three times more likely to develop heart disease than those with normal blood pressure.

Stress is an underestimated risk factor that can influence **all the other risk factors** and amplify them. **Stress is the leading cause of hypertension and the leading risk factor for heart disease.**

Heart disease is more difficult to diagnose in women and they respond less favorably than men to treatment. It is essential for women to be educated in and dedicated to cardiac disease prevention.

One of the reasons it is more difficult to diagnose and treat women is that, historically, physicians have considered heart disease to be a men's disease. Studies have shown that women patients are not treated as aggressively as men by their physicians in the areas of risk factor modification and disease intervention. There is still a belief among the medical establishment that women are not as vulnerable as men to a heart attack, and when women complain of chest pain, it is not taken seriously as it is thought to be psychosomatic in most cases. Consequently, women present with more advanced heart disease than men when they are finally treated.

Women have more silent heart attacks than men, and heart disease presents differently in women than in men. A woman's first warning sign of a heart attack is usually angina or chest pain which can mimic indigestion, 'nerve pain', jaw pain, and may not present typically with chest pain radiating to the left arm, which we think of when we think of a heart attack. Women undermine their pain and go about their life as caregivers largely ignoring their symptoms. Moreover, most women have a higher threshold for pain and wait longer to go to their physician for symptom management than men. Stress tests are more unreliable in women, as false positive and negative rates are greater, decreasing the sensitivity of the test.

One of the mechanisms of heart disease is constriction of the coronary arteries of the heart by plaque buildup. This plaque is a result of lifestyle choices and familial risk. More recent evidence shows that heart disease is an inflammatory disease, rather than a static one thought to result from plaque build-up alone. Inflammation of the inner lining of the coronary arteries from inflammatory foods such as sugar and processed carbohydrates renders this lining vulnerable to micro-tears when stress hormones surge. These surges create irritability and spasm of the coronary lining, tearing it and creating focus for plaque formation. Furthermore, if a plaque is already formed, a surge can dislodge the plaque,

causing a heart attack. The catecholamine surges from stress also lead to irritability of the heart and can cause sudden death. In Americans, the most common presentation of a heart attack is sudden death.

Stress is a heavily underestimated cause of heart disease and heart attacks. The Framingham Study showed that women clerical workers with little control over their work environment, who had repetitive job patterns and received scant recognition and underutilization of skills, had higher rates of coronary artery disease than homemakers without jobs outside their homes. Working women with three or more children are also more vulnerable to heart disease. Feelings of suppressed hostility, an unsupportive boss, being married to a blue collar worker were also found to be key risk factors in this study. Single, working women had the lowest incidence of heart disease.

Essi Systems, a San Francisco based stress research firm discovered that the only factor with a significant impact on a person's ability to withstand work pressure is "personal power," a feeling of control over one's environment and the ability to respond to life stresses in a healthy manner.

Women are the educators and health promoters in our society. They are communal, emotional, and relational beings. These are their gifts. When they learn how to keep themselves and their families healthy, they change the health profile of their communities.

A whole foods, Mediterranean diet, low in saturated fat and high in omega-3 fatty acids, daily aerobic exercise (even 20 minutes per day), a meditation practice, tight control of diabetes, hypertension, elevated cholesterol, cessation of cigarette smoking, stress reduction, and reclamation of personal power are key interventions that can lead to a significant reduction in heart disease.

Dean Ornish M.D., has shown in replicable studies that a lifestyle program that consistently engages the above components can, in fact, reverse heart disease.

I encourage you to become advocates for yourselves and your families; to make heart healthy choices, and serve as a role model for your family and community. Most of all, educate yourself and become self-aware to gain personal power and to reclaim your health. Start with small steps and build on them every day. Use your feelings of well-being as feedback to continue living from healthy choices. Small changes in lifestyle, from a place of awareness and understanding, can result in large improvements in health and well-being. The body's resilience and regenerative potential are ever present. They are worth relying on.

©May, 2014 Kalpana (Rose) M. Kumar M.D., CEO and Medical Director , The Ommani Center for Integrative Medicine, Pewaukee, WI. [www.ommanicenter.com](http://www.ommanicenter.com) Author of *Becoming Real: Reclaiming Your Health in Midlife* 2014, Medial Press.