

# Heart Disease and Women

**H**ear disease kills more women each year in the United States than any other medical problem. Heart disease takes the lives of more women in the United States than stroke, breast cancer, ovarian or uterine cancer, and HIV combined. Women may have fewer or different heart disease symptoms than men have, until the heart disease is far advanced. The most common form of heart disease, **coronary heart disease** (blockage of the coronary arteries, the heart's blood supply), is often preventable.

The December 25, 2002, issue of *JAMA* includes an article about treatment of heart attacks and **angina** (heart-related pain) in women.

## THE DIFFERENCES ARE IMPORTANT

Most of the heart research done in the past used men as study participants. Because of this, the special needs of women who have heart disease may have been ignored. Now research studies look specifically at women to better understand how heart disease develops and progresses in women.

African American women and Hispanic women are more likely to die from their heart disease than are white women. Women who have diabetes are more likely than men with diabetes to develop severe heart disease.

Women are more likely to have painless progression of heart disease. Their heart-related pain may not be located on the left side of the chest as often as it is in men. Pain or discomfort in the stomach area may be mistakenly dismissed as heartburn or indigestion. Women may also have nausea, fatigue, dizziness, pain in one or both arms, neck or jaw pain, or shortness of breath as their heart-related symptoms. In many women, the first heart attack is fatal because previous symptoms and risk factors were ignored.

**Risk factors** for heart disease are the same in women as they are in men. Smoking, high blood pressure, overweight, **sedentary lifestyle** (little or no exercise), diabetes, high cholesterol, age, and family history of heart problems all increase a woman's chances of having heart disease.

## HOW TO REDUCE YOUR CHANCE OF DEVELOPING HEART DISEASE

- See your doctor regularly and talk about heart risks
- Do not use tobacco
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Manage diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol with the help of your doctor
- Eat at least 5 servings of fruit and vegetables every day
- Get regular physical activity—at least 30 minutes a day on most days of the week

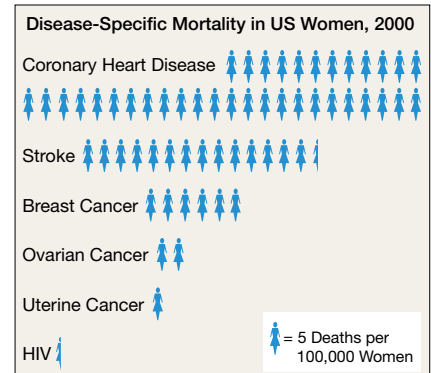
The role of **hormone replacement therapy (HRT)** to prevent heart disease has recently been questioned in a large study. Taking HRT does not appear to prevent heart disease in postmenopausal women and may increase the risk for it.

Janet M. Torpy, MD, Writer

Cassio Lynn, MA, Illustrator

Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- American Heart Association  
800/242-8721  
[www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)
- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute  
301/592-8573 (Information Center)  
[www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/hearttruth/index.htm](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/hearttruth/index.htm)

## INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page Index on *JAMA*'s Web site at [www.jama.com](http://www.jama.com). They are available in English and Spanish. A Patient Page on the benefits of physical activity for the heart was published in the March 21, 2001, issue; one on heart emergencies in the March 7, 2001, issue; one on heart failure in the February 6, 2002, issue; and one on hormone replacement therapy in the August 21, 2002, issue.

Sources: American College of Cardiology; National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute; American Heart Association

