

what are

Women Specific Heart Diseases

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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.
- **Symptoms:** High blood pressure, protein in the urine, headaches, and swelling in the hands and feet.
- **Risk Factors:** First-time pregnancy, obesity, a family history of preeclampsia, carrying multiples and gestational diabetes all must be considered.
- **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.

Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of premature death among women in Canada.

Women are five times more likely to die from heart disease than breast cancer each year.

Heart & Stroke, 2018

HEART ATTACK SYMPTOMS IN WOMEN

Women might notice heart attack symptoms that differ from those men usually experience. Although men often feel chest pain and shortness of breath, women can have these symptoms along with others that might not immediately point to the heart.



- Chest pain or discomfort
- Shortness of breath
- Fatigue
- Dizziness, lightheadedness, or fainting
- Pain in the neck, jaw, or throat
- Pain in the upper abdomen or stomach
- Cold sweat or sweating excessively
- Nausea or vomiting
- Cold or clammy skin
- Sleep disturbances
- Swelling in the legs, ankles, or feet
- Heart palpitations or irregular beats

WHY HEART SYMPTOMS IN WOMEN ARE OFTEN OVERLOOKED



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.

CONCLUSIONS:



Women's heart health is influenced by a complex mix of genetic, hormonal, lifestyle, and environmental factors. While many heart diseases affect both men and women, women often experience these conditions differently, and this can make diagnosis and treatment more challenging.

These listed heart conditions and risks underscore the importance of sex-specific research and awareness of how cardiovascular disease can manifest differently in women.

Awareness of these sex-specific differences is essential for better prevention, diagnosis, and management of heart disease in women.

Women should be proactive about their heart health, communicate openly with their healthcare providers, and make lifestyle changes to reduce their cardiovascular risk.

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.

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.

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.

These guidelines are compiled as general information. Always speak with your care team.

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