

## Body and Soul

# The Heart of a Woman: Handle with Care!

Cathy Adamkiewicz



*L*inda woke up Monday morning feeling a bit out of sorts. She felt anxious, like something bad was about to happen. To tell the truth, she'd been feeling out of it for a few weeks. "Well, I'm not getting any younger," she told herself. "Work has been stressful, and I haven't been getting much exercise lately."

She yawned again, struggling to wake up. "Why am I so tired?" she thought. The fatigue was really troubling. "Maybe it's because I've been sleeping so poorly," she told herself. "And I did have some indigestion last night. Maybe I ate something that didn't agree with me."

She grabbed a cup of coffee on her way out the door. "Too bad I don't have time for

breakfast – again. I guess I'll run through the drive-through for a quick bite. And I'm running late again! Always running late – always running! It's no wonder my blood pressure was high the last time I went to the doctor.

Maybe I should schedule another appointment. She did say I should come back for a follow-up. Why bother? She'll probably just ask me how the diet is going, and I'll have to confess I haven't even tried to lose this weight. I'll go in a few weeks – if I get a chance."

Does Linda's story sound familiar? Consider this ending.

Linda stared at the ceiling, thanking God that she had made it in time. She wasn't planning on this visit, that's for sure. She



*had rushed through her day, as she frequently did, trying to get everything in, and now this.*

*For once she was glad she had a habit of rushing. When she started having chest pains after work, she picked up the phone. It was a good thing she called 911 instead of “waiting it out.” Maybe that’s what got her to the emergency room in time. Just in time to find out that she was having a heart attack.*

Women like Linda, women like YOU, are having heart attacks every day.

Heart disease is the number one killer of American women.

Read that line again. The number one killer.

Consider the facts about heart disease in women.

- Heart disease, stroke, and other cardiovascular diseases claim the lives of more than 450,000 American women each year.
- Heart attacks kill six times as many women as breast cancer.
- Each year, 435,000 women in the United States have heart attacks, and almost half of them die.
- 42 percent of women who have heart attacks die within one year, compared to 24 percent of men.
- 31, 837 women die each year of congestive heart failure, representing 62.6 percent of all heart failure deaths.
- Three million women die from stroke each year. Stroke accounts for more deaths among women than men.
- Over the last 25 years, the death rate for heart disease in men has declined steadily (by more than 17 percent), while the death rate for

women has declined by only 2.5 percent

- Recent studies continue to confirm that women who have heart attacks receive fewer of the recommended treatments, compared to men.
- More than 90 percent of primary care physicians don’t know that heart disease kills more women each year than men.

The statistics are frightening, but the good news is that women are not powerless. While some factors are out of our control (heredity, our ethnic background, aging, etc.) we can make lifestyle choices that lower our risk of suffering from heart disease.

And while many of us are rushing around like the fictitious Linda in the anecdote above, we need to take the time to learn about heart disease risks, our personal health picture (the statistics we really should be concerned about!) and the unusual symptoms that some women experience when having a heart attack.

Linda might sound like any of us on a Monday morning, but an educated observer might guess she was actually exhibiting heart attack symptoms. Unlike men, women don’t always experience the classic “movie heart attack” involving serious crushing chest pain. Rather, their symptoms often include only shortness of breath, weakness, unusual fatigue, a cold sweat, dizziness, or a feeling of doom.

According to one study by the by the National Institutes of Health, some women (like our Linda) reported symptoms that actually began weeks before the actual heart attack including unusual fatigue (70 percent), sleep disturbances (48 percent),

shortness of breath (42 percent), indigestion (39 percent) and anxiety (35 percent).

Once she finds out she's at risk for heart disease, what's a woman to do? Plenty. Lifestyle changes can dramatically reduce your odds of dying from heart disease. (In fact, experts say women are more likely than men to benefit from these changes.)

Some suggestions:

**Exercise regularly.** 30 minutes of brisk walking a day is a good start.

**Eat well.** Limit saturated and trans fats while adding monounsaturated fats to your diet. Eat fish at least twice a week. Avoid processed and "fast" foods. Eat plenty of fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and watch your sodium intake.

**Manage stress.** It may sound easier said than done, but stress can do real damage to your health and well-being. Meditate every day. (Studies have shown praying the rosary lowers blood pressure!) Make sleep a priority, and ask for and accept help from others.

**Control high blood pressure.** It's not called "The Silent Killer" for nothing. Have your blood pressure checked by a doctor at least once a year – you can have hypertension with no symptoms warning you of its presence. If prescribed medication, take it. Invest in a monitor to check your pressure at home.

**Lower your risks.** Don't smoke or drink too much alcohol. (Consume two drinks or less per day –preferably of red wine.) Follow the wisdom of the Catholic Church and do not use birth control pills. (Combining oral contraceptives with smoking increases a woman's risk of heart disease dramatically.)

**Build healthy relationships.** Take the time to nurture your relationships with God and neighbor. Studies show that church-going people live longer and have better

Doctors say the most important stats are the ones that make up your individual wellness profile. The National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease recommends that women aim for the following:

- A total cholesterol reading of less than 200 mg/dl
- LDL ("bad" cholesterol) reading of less than 100 mg/dl
- HDL ("good" cholesterol) reading of 50 mg/dl or higher
- A triglyceride reading of less than 150 mg/dl
- A blood pressure reading of 120/80 mmHg or lower
- A fasting glucose level below 100 mg/dl
- A body mass index of 25 or less
- A waist circumference of 35 inches or less

health. Volunteerism has also been shown to improve health – and individuals reporting several close friendships have less illness.

**Don't make excuses.** Women tend to delay getting medical care for heart attacks more so than men. Know the facts. Don't argue that you don't have time to see a doctor, or that family responsibilities prevent you from properly caring for yourself.

Take responsibility for your well-being, and your heart. Those who love and depend on you will thank you for it!

*Cathy Adamkiewicz is the author of **Broken and Blessed: A Life Story**, which documents the life and death of her infant daughter Celeste*