

Women's Heart Health Being Ignored



According to a study presented at the American College of Cardiology's 65th Annual Scientific Session, women visiting their doctor are less likely to be advised regarding heart health and are more likely to be told to lose weight.

Heart disease strikes women 7-10 years later than men but it is still a leading cause of death. However, the risk of heart disease is often underestimated in women because of the misconception that they are somehow protected from it. Statistics show that the number of myocardial infarctions in 35 to 54 year old women have increased over the last 20 years but have decreased in men.

A study conducted by the Barbara Streisand Women's Heart Center at Cedars-Sinai Heart Institute in California investigated the issues that are driving this trend. Lead author Dr.C Noel Bairey Merz explains that despite three decades of campaigning by women's heart health advocacy groups, women's health awareness remains stalled. The goal of this study was to understand the roadblocks and why women and their doctors do not take heart health seriously.

Medical guidelines suggest that anybody with risk factors for heart disease needs frequent cholesterol and blood pressure checks. They also need to be advised to stop smoking and adopt a healthier lifestyle.

The study used a questionnaire to uncover whether such guidance and counselling was being provided to women the same way as it is to men. More than 1000 women across a range of socioeconomic strata, races and geographical regions were included in the study. They were asked questions regarding any care or advice they received about heart disease from their doctors.

Findings showed that 74 percent of women displayed at least one risk factor for heart disease such as irregular menstruation, family history, diabetes and high blood cholesterol. Only 16 percent were told by their doctor that they could be at risk for heart disease but 34 percent were told to lose weight. Women in the lower socioeconomic groups, younger women and non-whites were found to be least aware of the dangers of heart disease and its symptoms.

Dr Merz says, "women feel stigmatised. They are most often told to lose weight rather than have their blood pressure and blood cholesterol checked. If women don't think they're going to get heart disease, and they're being told by society and their doctors that everything would be fine if they just lost weight, that explains the paradox of why women aren't going in for the recommended heart checks. Who wants to be told to lose weight?"

Findings from this study show that obesity is a risk factor for heart disease but doctors should not concentrate solely on this one fact of women's health but should also offer additional counselling and monitor other health factors as well.

Other research also shows that men in similar circumstances are more likely to get heart health advice as compared to women and are less commonly advised to lose weight. Dr Merz says that there has always been more focus on weight loss and that is a major reason why 75 percent of women do not discuss heart disease because of the stigma surrounding weight. Efforts need to be taken to dispel this stigma and to improve knowledge about heart disease.

Source: American College of Cardiology Scientific Session

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