



Think AGAIN

*Six common thoughts
that could actually mean
heart attack*

I'M HAVING A HEART ATTACK! Why can't anyone see that but me?" 38-year-old Theresa Volpa wondered in desperation. The stay-at-home mother of two girls, ages 6 and 9, had suffered from mysterious symptoms for months. A hectic holiday season combined with a move to a new home left her feeling exhausted—not unusual, except for the degree. "I wouldn't carry the laundry up and down the steps, because I knew that it would wear me out. I would even get tired washing my hair," recalls Volpa, who struggled to stay awake while reading her daughters a bedtime story at 8 p.m.

She visited her primary care physician, who ordered blood work and a stress test, which came back normal. Two months later, a massive heart attack hit at a family birthday party.

"A funny sensation came over me, like the blood was drained from me," she recalls. "Both my arms felt heavy and numb, and I had an odd sensation of pressure in my jaw." Then, pain in her chest grew so severe "it felt like an elephant was standing on my chest. It was difficult for me to talk." Somehow she managed to sputter, "Dial 911," to her husband.

Volpa had no doubt she was having a heart attack, but the paramedics weren't convinced. They even thought she could walk to the ambulance, creating a dangerous delay that's all too common for female heart attack victims. A recent study found that paramedics generally take longer transporting women to the hospital than men.

Why the difference? Women often suffer from six sneaky heart disease symptoms that even professionals can miss:

● BY LORI K. BAKER

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1 YOU THINK: "I'm really out of shape."

THINK AGAIN: Suddenly, you must take a breather in the middle of your usual morning walk. Or you can't go up a flight of stairs at home without feeling winded. "A huge red flag is when a woman tells me she can't exercise like she used to," says Mary Ann Bauman, M.D., an American Heart Association (AHA) spokeswoman.

2 YOU THINK: "It must have been something I ate."

THINK AGAIN: Eating a slice of pepperoni pizza brings on a sharp burning sensation in your chest, near your breastbone or ribs. Is the pain heartburn, or a sneaky symptom of a heart attack?

"This is really difficult," Bauman says, "because heartburn or dyspepsia can be an indicator of heart disease. If you take a Tums and it completely goes away, it's probably not your heart."

But be alarmed if your heartburn comes with other telltale symptoms, such as shortness of breath, sweating or arm pain. Other red flags are heartburn that doesn't get better with antacid remedies and a burning sensation in your chest during exercise.

3 YOU THINK: "It's just another hot flash."

THINK AGAIN: There you are, at a business meeting or dinner party, with a red, flushed face and beads of sweat gathering on your brow and pooling under your arms. If you're perimenopausal, you could chalk up the embarrassing symptoms to "the change," but suddenly feeling clammy and sweaty is also a red flag you might be having a heart attack.

"During menopause, when you're losing your estrogen, you can be at high risk for a heart attack if you have a strong family disposition for coronary disease," says Suzanne Sorof, M.D., an interventional cardiologist and AHA spokeswoman. Dial 911 if sweatiness is accompanied by other symptoms, such as nausea, jaw pain, shortness of breath or heartburn, Bauman advises.

4 YOU THINK: "I'm having an anxiety attack."

THINK AGAIN: Hearing about your company's next round of layoffs, you feel so anxious it's difficult to breathe as your heart pounds madly and indigestion grips your gut. Panic attack or heart attack?

Shortness of breath, anxiety, palpitations and indigestion are symptoms of both. "Women with heart disease often feel very anxious and nervous; there's a sense of impending doom," Sorof says. "Women are so in tune with their bodies, when something is not right, they feel unsettled."

The AHA advises not to wait longer than five minutes before calling 911 for help if you have these warning signs.

5 YOU THINK: "It must be the flu."

THINK AGAIN: A heart attack can masquerade as the flu, leaving you feeling queasy and lightheaded and breaking out in a cold sweat.

"Many people have nausea and vomiting when they're actually having a heart attack," Sorof says. "I've heard a lot of women say, 'I've been taking Tums or Roloids for two weeks, and I'm not getting better.' If it's a new symptom, that's a big red flag that maybe this isn't nausea, this isn't reflux, this is their heart."

6 YOU THINK: "My heart just skips a beat."

THINK AGAIN: If your heart's all aflutter, don't just chalk it up to stress, that double espresso you drank or even falling in love. You may be experiencing atrial fibrillation, one of the most common heart rhythm disorders in the United States, affecting as many as 2.2 million Americans.

The most common symptom is the fluttering sensation of a racing heart—also called palpitations. With or without that sensation, a person might become short of breath, or suddenly feel fatigued or lightheaded. Some people may faint during an episode.


Disorders of the regular rhythmic beating of the heart—or arrhythmias—can occur in healthy hearts and be of minimal consequence. But in other cases, the condition can lead to sudden cardiac death or stroke. "If your heart flutters, tell your doctor," Sorof advises.

TAKE IT TO HEART

Of course, women also can experience the classic heart disease symptoms frequently suffered by men:

- ♥ Chest discomfort that lasts for more than a few minutes, goes away and then comes back. It can feel like uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain.
- ♥ Discomfort in other areas of the upper body: both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach.
- ♥ Shortness of breath (with or without chest discomfort).

Whether you have sneaky or classic heart disease symptoms, pay close attention and seek immediate medical care.

"Act like a private eye and pay attention to when the symptoms happen, how long they last, what makes them better, what you were doing at the time and what makes them worse," Bauman says. "That's an important way to get your doctor's attention, because that's how we think about it." 

LISTEN

Tune In to Your Heart

To learn more about how to protect yourself from heart attack, listen to the "Heart Disease and Stroke in Women" podcast from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Visit cdc.gov/family/podcasts.



Little Hearts Need Love Too

Here's an alarming statistic: If the health trends remain constant, about 35 million of today's 83 million children eventually will die from heart and blood vessel disease, reports the American Heart Association (AHA). But it doesn't have to be that way.

"If parents get some healthy routines down early in life with diet and exercise, they can help prevent their children from becoming one of these statistics," says Stephen Pophal, M.D., a pediatric cardiologist and an AHA spokesman.

Here are four action steps the AHA recommends to protect your child's heart:

- 1 Designate one day a week as Family Healthy-Heart Day. Fun activities for kids include coloring a food pyramid or filling vials with the amount of sugar in one soda.
- 2 Write out a heart-healthy menu for that day, including breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks.
- 3 Choose at least one physical activity that lasts 30 minutes or three activities that last 10 minutes each.
- 4 During the day, talk about things you're doing as a family to keep your hearts healthy.



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