



#StandByHerHRI



# WOMEN AND HEART DISEASE

Know the facts

## How common is heart disease in women?

It is commonly believed that heart disease mainly affects men, however cardiovascular disease will affect one in three Australian women.

It is the leading cause of death for women in Australia. Heart disease is responsible for the deaths of more women than all cancers combined.

## Why are women different?

Women's experience of heart disease differs from men because:

- Women's symptoms are often milder, they can arise later in the illness and they can be unusual
- Because heart disease in women often goes undetected, the damage caused can be more advanced and outcomes can be poorer than for men
- Some tests used to diagnose heart disease are also less accurate in women than they are in men

Other aspects affecting women are:

- Menopause. After reaching menopause, women's risk of heart disease increases substantially. This is believed to be because the low levels of the hormone oestrogen may provide less protection from heart disease
- Oral contraceptives, which increase the risk of heart disease in women who smoke
- Hormone replacement therapy, which it is now understood does not reduce the risk of heart disease in women who already suffer from it, and may also raise the risk of heart attacks and blood clots.

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## What are the risk factors for heart disease in women?

Heart disease is generally caused by atherosclerosis, the build-up of fatty deposits in the artery walls over time, which reduce the flow of blood to the heart. This is largely preventable.

While some risk factors cannot be changed, most heart disease risk factors can be reduced with a change in lifestyle.

The heart disease risk factors that cannot be changed are:

- Increasing age
- A family history of heart disease

The heart disease risk factors that can be changed are:

- High blood pressure, which means the heart is having to work harder to pump blood at a higher pressure than normal to the vital organs. This is the most important risk factor for heart failure and affects more than half of Australian women over 55
- Smoking, including passive smoking. Smoking creates a higher risk of heart disease for women than it does for men, especially when combined with the use of the oral contraceptive pill
- High blood cholesterol
- Diabetes, which affects more women than men and raises the risk of heart attack significantly more for women than it does for men.
- Lack of physical activity
- Excessive alcohol consumption
- Being above a healthy weight
- Depression and social isolation

## Heart attack in women

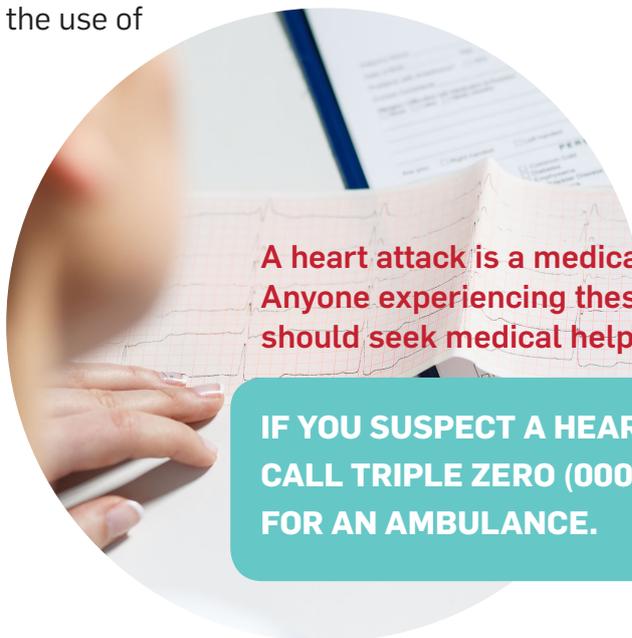
Because the symptoms of a heart attack can be different in women, many women are unaware of the warning signs of heart disease or heart attack. In the event of a heart attack, women are also less likely than men to seek help quickly.

*One third of women with heart disease experience no chest pain at all.*

While men often experience central chest pain when having a heart attack, women commonly interpret this pain as indigestion simply because they do not expect a heart attack.

When experiencing a heart attack, women are also more likely to feel:

- Pain in the jaw, back or neck
- Shortness of breath
- Nausea, vomiting and cold sweats
- Overwhelming weakness or fatigue
- Anxiety, lethargy and loss of appetite



**A heart attack is a medical emergency. Anyone experiencing these symptoms should seek medical help immediately.**

**IF YOU SUSPECT A HEART ATTACK, CALL TRIPLE ZERO (000) AND ASK FOR AN AMBULANCE.**