



What could save you from a *Heart attack*

Heart attack symptoms are harder to spot in women. Recognising them could save your life. Read on...

It's known that heart disease and stroke combined is the leading cause of death among women in Malaysia. And the most common manifestation of a heart attack - which signals that a part of your heart is dying - in women, is chest pain or discomfort lasting more than a few minutes, according to Dr Ernest Ng Wee Oon, Consultant Cardiologist at Pantai Hospital Kuala Lumpur.

While these are obvious symptoms, there are warning signs that can be subtle. In most cases, symptoms are not always sudden or severe, and about one quarter of sufferers say they didn't experience chest pain at all.

Some patients may even find that they experienced chest tightness associated with cold sweatiness, nausea, dizziness and so on.

"One of the major reasons for the variability in patients with a heart attack is that the heart muscle doesn't receive the same kind of nerve supply as the skin, skeletal muscles and bones. The heart has no pain fibres," says Dr Tong Khim Leng, a sports cardiologist.

The good news is, people who are treated within an hour of their first heart attack have the greatest chance of surviving and continuing to enjoy a good quality of life. Paying attention to the more discreet signs could save your life:



CALLING FOR HELP

Anyone with a suspected heart attack should call 999 for help. “Unfortunately, not many sufferers go to hospital by ambulance. The rest still make their own way to a hospital which can pose a tremendous risk.

“One of the causes of sudden death in patients with a heart attack is the occurrence of a dangerous heart rhythm, called ventricular fibrillation (VF). This is a situation where the heart literally stops contracting and the patient has six to 10 minutes for revival before the brain suffers irreversible damage,” said Dr Ernest.

The most effective treatment for VF is immediate defibrillation, which is delivering an electric current through the heart with a defibrillator, which is available in all St John’s ambulances. (24 hour hotline 03-3371 5005).

The paramedics also have had a special training in CPR and advanced life support, including the use of defibrillators. Once at the hospital, an assessment and immediate ECG can be done to determine the patient’s condition and how to stabilise them.



Toothache

Although most of us would expect pain, or pressure, in the chest to be the predominant sign of heart disease, in fact, the pain can refer to other parts of the body, including the teeth and jaw.

It is not uncommon for angina or heart-related pain to be experienced as discomfort in the lower jaw and patients will often say that they feel as though they have a toothache radiating on both sides.

Dr Ernest says that if jaw pains are associated with other symptoms such as nausea, sweating, breathlessness and chest discomfort, a heart attack could be a possible cause, and could raise suspicion with a cardiologist.



Excessive Sweating

Not everyone who breaks into a sweat has a dodgy ticker, but excessive, “clammy or cold swats, heart flutters, or paleness can all be signs of heart attack,” says Prof Robert Graham, executive director of Sydney-based Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute.

Shortness of breath is another sign. Dr Ernest adds that if you find that you have breathlessness that lingers or have a racing heart rate while carrying out your daily activities, it could be a symptom of heart troubles.

“Each woman will present with different symptoms of a heart attack,” says Prof Graham. “Some experience several symptoms while others show all symptoms. There are women who show no symptoms before their heart attack. The sooner you can recognise your symptoms and take appropriate action, the better.”



Tummy Troubles

Many women suffering a heart attack believe that they may have a tummy bug. “About a third of elderly women having a heart attack present with abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting,” says Dr Tong.

In the absence of chest pain, patients will frequently interpret mild nausea or vomiting and sweating as being due to another problem such as a viral illness, rather than due to an underlying heart issue. It’s common for central chest or upper abdominal discomfort to be interpreted as heartburn or indigestion.



Neck, Shoulder Or Back Pain

Discomfort in the shoulder blades, shoulder or neck can be signs of an underlying heart problem. But it can often be interpreted as muscle ache or back strain.

In fact, most women will pass off this type of pain as the result of overexertion at the gym or sitting too long at a desk.



Dizzy Or Vacant Spells

Not feeling “quite with it”, dizzy spells or feeling lightheaded can be a sign of a problem with your heart. Feeling faint and shaky for no reason could mean that not enough blood is getting to your heart. This is especially so if you’re also suffering from shortness of breath and a cold sweat, so pay attention to this symptom.

“Unexplained feelings of anxiety, fatigue or weakness – especially with exertion – are other signs,” says Prof Graham. Many women also report a feeling of “impending doom” moments before or during a heart attack – they’re aware that something is wrong, but they don’t exactly know what it is or how to deal with it.

“Women often ignore these early warning signs,” adds Prof Graham. “This is for a few reasons – one is that pain tolerance is often better in women than men and also women often ascribe their symptoms to other things, particularly if they are very busy looking after the household and children.” Too often women attribute this to stress rather than a heart attack.



Fatigue And Weakness

More than 70 percent of women in a study published in the journal *Circulation* reported extreme fatigue leading up to their heart attacks. But this sort isn’t the usual fatigue from lack of sleep or being exhausted – it’s more that you are so tired all the time that you can barely walk down the street or do daily activities without resting.

If you feel completely washed out for no reason, your heart could be under strain. Fatigue that is new and unexplained is a sign of heart attack. Sudden, profound weakness (muscle weakness all over the body or just in one area) is another. If fatigue stops you from going about your daily routine, it’s worth getting a heart check-up.

LOVE YOUR HEART

“Many people think that heart disease only affects older men but in reality heart disease is the number one killer of Malaysian women,” says Dr Ernest. “In fact, one in 10 Malaysian women have a heart attack each day.

New research shows that people who know their “heart age” (as compared to their real age) are much more likely to implement health and lifestyle changes to lower their risk of cardiovascular disease. On average, a 45-year-old woman has a heart age that’s four years older than her real age.

Visit www.heartage.me to find out how old your heart is and get reliable advice on the do’s and don’ts when it comes to your heart’s health. **W**

