

- Most women are not completely certain that the symptoms they are having are signs of a heart attack, because they often have symptoms that are different from men's. Women are more likely to experience shortness of breath, nausea and vomiting, indigestion, tiredness, sweating, and arm, neck and shoulder pain. Many women experience unusual tiredness or retention of fluid in the months before their heart attack.

### **If I Am Having A Heart Attack, What Should I Expect?**

- You will be hooked up to a heart monitor and be given oxygen to improve the amount of oxygen in your blood.
- You will have an electrocardiogram (ECG) where sticky electrodes are placed on your chest, arms and legs. These electrodes pick up the electrical activity in your heart. If you are having a heart attack, abnormalities in this electrical pattern will show up on your ECG.
- You will have a blood sample drawn from your arm which will show if your heart muscle has been damaged.
- You may be given medications such as Nitroglycerin and Morphine to control the pain. You may be given an Aspirin to discourage further clot formation.
- If your ECG shows that you are having a heart attack, you might be sent for a coronary angiogram. This test is done with a catheter threaded from an artery in your leg or arm into the arteries in your heart. Dye is injected through this catheter into the arteries in your heart.
- If there is a blockage, the doctor may try

to reopen the blocked artery with balloon angioplasty. This procedure involves a catheter being threaded into the blocked artery and a tiny balloon in the catheter is inflated to open up the artery.

A small metal stent may be inserted into the artery at the site of the blockage to prevent this artery from blocking again.

- You may be given a 'clot-buster' medication to dissolve the clot that is blocking your coronary artery.

**Remember – the sooner the artery to your heart is unblocked with clot-busting medications or angioplasty, the more heart muscle will be saved. To be most effective these treatments should be initiated within one hour of the start of the heart attack symptoms, so don't wait!**

### **What If They Tell Me My ECG and Blood-Work Are Normal?**

You still did the right thing in coming in to have your symptoms checked out!

You may still be at risk! A normal ECG or blood-work may indicate that you are not having a heart attack at this moment, but you may still have narrowing in your coronary arteries that could block at a later time. Sometimes heart symptoms come and go, and are a warning that the arteries in your heart are not providing enough blood supply to the heart at times. Should your heart symptoms come back, and last longer than a few minutes, you should have your symptoms checked again in Emergency.

### **You Deserve Excellent Care!**

Ask questions! You have the right to know exactly what is going on with your body. Write down questions that you may have before you talk to a healthcare worker. Ask for explanations if you need them. Write down what the doctor or nurse tells you to help you remember. You can look these things up later when you are less anxious if you wish. You have the right to ask for copies of reports for your own records.

Take ownership of your health! Consider yourself a valuable member of the health care team. You are the expert in knowing when something is not right with your body. Don't forget that the assessments you make of your symptoms, and the efforts that you make to get early treatment, are just as important as the treatment you receive in hospital. Talk to your health care workers with confidence. Healthcare workers are your partners in getting the specialized treatment that you need.

**Don't be intimidated by the busy surroundings in Doctors' offices and hospitals, you have a right to get treatment.**

### **Who Is Most At Risk?**

Factors that would increase your risk of heart attack include:

- Smoking
- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- High blood cholesterol
- Obesity
- Physical inactivity
- Family history of early heart disease
- Previous heart attack or angina

- Age - Most heart attacks in women occur after age 50

### **What I Can I Do to Prevent Heart Disease?**

- Don't Smoke – smoking is the greatest risk for heart attacks
- Stay Active – you can reduce your chances of heart disease by 30% to 50% just by staying active. Talk to your doctor about an exercise program.
- Eat a heart-healthy diet – follow the Canada Food Guide. Try to eat plenty of foods containing heart protective substances called antioxidants (e.g. green and red peppers, broccoli, tomatoes, strawberries, and oranges), omega 3 fatty acids (e.g. salmon, mackerel, and herring), and fibre (whole grain cereals, bread, and pasta, fresh fruits and vegetables).
- Maintain a healthy weight – If you are overweight, even a 10% drop in your weight can improve how well your heart pumps, decrease your blood pressure, and lower your cholesterol.
- Know your numbers – have your blood pressure and cholesterol levels in your blood checked regularly.
- Manage your stress – stay connected to family and friends. Take time for things you enjoy. Exercise regularly. Laugh!

### **From two women with first hand experience:**

*“ Since my heart attack and open-heart surgery, I have gained courage and confidence in accessing information from my health care professionals. It is important to be our own*

advocates; fear is greatly dissipated when we know what is going on with our bodies and what can, or cannot, be done about it.”

“Finding the balance between trusting my own instincts and trusting the knowledge of others has been the biggest challenge, especially after realizing I had lived with undetected and severe coronary artery disease for a number of years. Learning to let go of anger and nagging fears was essential to my health. Talking to other women who have survived similar experiences was very helpful. It is an unimaginably effective and quiet support in the face of potentially life threatening circumstances.”



The Heart to Heart Support Society is a group of people whose lives have been changed by the effects of heart disease. It is a non-profit organization incorporated under the Societies Act of the Province of Alberta.

Alberta Societies Registration:  
#89059 4591 RR 0001

**Special thanks to**



**for their support.**

**Meetings are held the first Tuesday of each month.**

**For specific information please contact:**

**our website**

**[www.womenscardiacsupport.org](http://www.womenscardiacsupport.org)**

## Woman to Woman Cardiac Support Group



### Women Living With Heart Disease

By: Heather Russell RN, MN, PhD

If you have received the diagnosis of heart disease, you understand that this can be frightening and intimidating. Heart disease is something that women need to understand and manage within the difficulties of everyday life. Every woman living with heart disease has their own journey, and this journey can be made easier by talking to a trusted health professional, or someone who has had a similar journey.

The Woman to Woman Cardiac Support Group is a special interest group addressing the specific concerns of women living with heart disease. It is organized and operated under the parent Heart to Heart Society.

The Mission of Woman to Woman is to provide support and encouragement to women with heart disease as they examine and deal with issues unique to women. Heart disease is a

leading cause of death and disability for women in North America. Women can take charge of their heart health by becoming informed about their personal risks for heart disease, adopting lifestyle changes to reduce their risk, and responding quickly to symptoms.

### What is a Heart Attack?

Heart disease that leads to a heart attack starts when arteries that feed the heart muscle become hardened and narrowed by fatty plaque. A heart attack occurs when an artery feeding the heart muscle is blocked by a blood clot. Heart muscle begins to die if this artery is not reopened. The longer it takes to remove this blockage, the greater the damage to heart muscle.

### Warning Signs of a Heart Attack could include any of the following:

- Chest Discomfort: such as pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain in the chest that lasts more than a few minutes [ Discomfort can disappear and then come back later. ]
- Other Areas of Upper Body Discomfort:
  - one or both arms
  - neck or jaw
  - back
  - stomach
- Shortness of Breath
- Light-headedness
- Sweating
- Unusual tiredness
- Nausea

**\*\*Most heart attacks start slowly with mild discomfort. You need to pay attention to what your body is telling you!\*\***

### What should I do if I have one or more of these symptoms?

- Call 911 – don't wait more than 5 minutes. Ambulance workers have the equipment and training to begin treatment. If your heart should stop beating because of the heart attack, they have the equipment and training to start it beating again.
- If you don't have access to 911, have someone else drive you to the hospital.
- Never drive yourself to the hospital unless there is absolutely no other choice.

### Don't Wait – This Could Mean Your Life!

• Many people having a heart attack wait too long to seek help. This delay increases the damage to their heart, and could put their life at risk. Over half of all deaths due to heart attacks occur in the first hour after symptoms begin. Women have been found to delay seeking help for a heart attack 1-2 hours longer than men. The reason for this is unclear. The longer you wait to get help, the more heart muscle could be permanently damaged.

• Don't worry that this might turn out to be a false alarm – only health care workers can determine if these symptoms are the sign of a heart attack