
Poor Awareness of Women's Cardiovascular Disease



A new U.S. study reveals that women and physicians do not put enough emphasis on cardiovascular disease in women, and a social stigma regarding body weight may be a primary barrier to these important discussions. The findings highlight the need to raise awareness of heart disease in women and promote clinicians' use of evidence-based guidelines to care for female patients.

The study, published in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*, was conducted by researchers from the Women's Heart Alliance. They interviewed 1,011 U.S. women aged 25-60 years and collected physician survey data from 200 primary care physicians and 100 cardiologists. The goal of the surveys was to determine knowledge, attitudes and beliefs regarding heart disease in women.

The researchers found that 45 percent of women were unaware that heart disease is the number one killer of women in the U.S. Awareness level was lower in women with lower levels of education and income and in ethnic minorities. Nearly 71 percent of women almost never brought up the issue of heart health with their physician, assuming their doctor would raise the issue if there was a problem. However, physicians were more likely to discuss cardiovascular health if prompted by the patient or due to the presence of a risk factor.

Other key findings include:

- While a majority of women reported having a routine physical or wellness exam in the past year, only 40 percent reported having a heart health assessment.
- 63 percent of women admitted to putting off going to the doctor at least sometimes and 45 percent of women cancelled or postponed an appointment until they lost weight.
- Many women reported being embarrassed or overwhelmed by their heart disease and many also cited difficulties in losing weight or finding time to exercise.
- Only 22 percent of primary care physicians and 42 percent of cardiologists felt well prepared to assess cardiovascular risk in women.
- Only 16 percent of primary care physicians and 22 percent of cardiologists fully implemented guidelines for risk assessment.

Lead author Bairey Merz, director of the Barbra Streisand Women's Heart Center in the Cedars-Sinai Heart Institute, stated: "National action campaigns should work to make cardiovascular disease 'real' to American women and destigmatise the disease by promoting the use of cardiovascular risk assessment to counter stereotypes with facts and valid assessments."

In an editorial comment published with the paper, Jennifer G. Robinson, MD, MPH, from the College of Public Health at the University of Iowa discusses the importance of developing healthy lifestyle habits early in life to reduce the risk for cardiovascular disease.

"Helping women overcome barriers to increasing physical activity and healthier eating habits may help to avoid the stigma of focusing on weight loss," she said. "Women are often the gate-keepers for family meals, activities and healthcare, and a focus on healthy lifestyle habits may also encourage early prevention in the family as a whole."

Source: [American College of Cardiology](#)
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