



IN THE U.S., MORE THAN 500,000 WOMEN DIE EACH YEAR OF HEART DISEASE — ONE EVERY MINUTE. HEART DISEASE IS THE LEADING CAUSE OF DEATH IN WOMEN OVER 40, ACCORDING TO THE AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION.

Women's symptoms are different

Women need to be aware that they may experience different symptoms than those traditionally described and experienced by men, Dr. Gattuso said. Often women experience a sense of heaviness or heartburn-like sensation accompanied by anxiety when having a heart attack.

"The anxiety may be misconstrued as nothing more than anxiety," Dr. Gattuso said.

Other symptoms sometimes experienced by a woman include shortness of breath, an isolated pain in the mid-back and an isolated pain in the jaw or elbow. She may have one or more of these symptoms.

Connie Hartman's heart attack manifested itself with shortness of breath and a pain in her neck. "It was like I had a kink in my neck from sleeping wrong on it and I just couldn't work it out," the 58-year-old Duncansville woman said. "I didn't recognize it as a heart attack. I thought I just needed my diabetes medicine."

Connie and Dixie exhibited some of the risk factors for coronary artery disease, Dr. Gattuso said. Family history, diabetes, hypertension, stress and smoking are major risk factors.

Dixie's family history includes three uncles in their 50s who died of heart attacks; her mother had coronary artery disease and heart bypass surgery at age 60. Dixie suffers from hypertension, which she controls with medication.

Connie's family history includes type 2 diabetes and high cholesterol, and she has both. Her mother, sister and brother also have heart disease.

Controllable risk factors

Stress is one of the risk factors associated with heart disease, along with smoking, that a person can control. "A family history of heart disease makes the need for a healthy lifestyle that much greater," Dr. Gattuso said, and consists of a diet low in fat and starchy foods, combined with regular, moderate exercise.

"With these healthy habits, women can reduce the risk of developing diabetes, hypertension and coronary artery disease. By maintaining a healthy lifestyle, they diminish the likelihood of blocked arteries."

Both women say they have changed the way they eat: few sweets, a lot more vegetables, chicken, fish and fruit.

"I try a lot of different recipes," Connie said. "My husband has been terrific because I don't cook two different meals — he eats what I eat. That support is so important."

She's lost weight and her cholesterol levels have improved, too.

"Some days I really screw up," she admits. "You have to forget that day and start again tomorrow. You have to. If you dwell on it too much, it gets too frustrating."

Heart of a woman

It can display unexpected symptoms when under attack

The pain ripped into the center of Dixie Claar's chest like a knife, waking her from a sound sleep. It couldn't have been a heart attack, she told herself, because the pain only lasted about five minutes.

Cardiologist Joseph W. Gattuso Jr., M.D., F.A.C.C., diagnosed Dixie, 53, of Claysburg, with coronary artery disease. Her pain was caused by a 90 percent blockage in one of her heart's main arteries.

Dr. Gattuso's associates, Hany F. Shanoudy, M.D., F.A.C.C., and Ziad Khoury, M.D., F.A.C.C., performed a heart catheterization and inserted a stent, an appliance that props open the walls of the clogged vessel, much like spokes open an umbrella.

"I can't believe the difference in my energy level," Dixie said recently. "I'm amazed at the way I feel. And everyone was wonderful during my treatment and showed me so much kindness."

Dixie said she considers the chest pain she suffered a "blessing because it got me to go to the doctor right away."

Connie Hartman prepares a heart-healthy vegetable stir fry.

PROGRAM ALERT:

Looking for a lifestyle change? Try yoga!

See Page 15 for date, time