



*Listen to  
Your Heart  
About  
Prevention*

By Haley Shapley

THERE'S A REASON WE HAVE SO MANY SAYINGS about the heart. When it comes down to it, the heart is the center of all human life and health.

It's never too late to make your heart healthier, even if you've had problems with it in the past. That's because heart disease is progressive, which means that it can get worse (or better!) over time. Major risk factors include things like high blood pressure, high cholesterol, smoking, obesity, and diabetes.

"These risk factors speed up the plaque building or clogging that can occur in the arteries," says George Andrews, M.D., cardiologist and Humana corporate

chief of quality. "Taking control of the risk factors can help prevent a life-threatening heart attack or stroke by slowing down or reversing the buildup of this plaque."

Men have always been at a greater risk for both heart attack and stroke than women. Men also tend to be younger when they get heart disease. That doesn't mean that women shouldn't protect themselves, though. In fact, more women than men die of stroke, and heart attack is the No. 1 killer of women in the United States. While men have more heart attacks, more women die from them because they might



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Could It Be a Stroke? Could It Be a Heart Attack?

Here are some symptoms you might see in someone having a stroke:

- Sudden numbness
- Weakness in the face, arm, and/or leg, especially if it's on one side of the body
- Confusion or difficulty speaking or understanding
- Sudden visual problems
- Sudden dizziness, balance problems, or trouble walking
- Sudden and severe headache without any known cause

Someone having a heart attack might have the following symptoms:

- Tightness, pressure, a squeezing feeling, or fullness in the chest that lasts for more than a few minutes or goes away and comes back
- Shortness of breath, nausea, or a cold sweat
- Squeezing sensation or pain up and down the spine
- Pain that moves through the left arm or up into the teeth or jaw

If you see signs of a stroke or heart attack in someone else, don't drive them to the hospital. By the time you get them there, it could be too late. An ambulance is the better choice, so if you see these symptoms or experience them yourself, always call 911.

— George Andrews, M.D.

not have the classic heart attack symptoms. Whatever your gender, take any symptoms seriously.

Know what your risk factors are and do your best to minimize the ones you can. For example, if your doctor says you have high cholesterol, you should talk with him or her about the kind of diet that will lower it. If you smoke, take steps to quit – even if you've tried before.

## Heart of the Matter

How do you know when it's time to see a doctor? Go when you have one or more of the following symptoms. "Remember, the later you seek help, the more likely you are to have a bad result," says Dr. Andrews.

- **Chest pain:** pain can be experienced as a fullness, dull ache, burning, or sharp stab
- **Shortness of breath:** the feeling of not being able to get enough air
- **Fatigue:** more than just run-of-the-mill tiredness
- **Palpitations:** when your heart skips a beat, flutters, or beats rapidly
- **Dizziness:** the sensation of feeling lightheaded; may involve fainting
- **Swelling:** fluid buildup or inflammation in tissues and/or joints
- **Numbness:** loss of sensation or feeling in part of your body

During an actual heart attack, you may feel nausea, start to sweat, or have a jaw ache.

## Heart to Heart

If you remember nothing else about taking care of your heart, know that you're in charge. Follow up on all doctors' appointments and always take the medicine you've been prescribed.

"It is important because the medicine is going to control the condition," Dr. Andrews says. "It reduces the possibility of your disease getting worse or causing a complication that can lead to a trip to the hospital."

It's never too late to take better care of your heart. Take the steps today to keep your heart as healthy as possible as you age. ■



## HOME ALONE PLAN

Many people live alone. Make sure you have a plan so you'll know what to do in case you're alone and start having heart attack symptoms. You could have only four or five minutes, so:

### DON'T

- Ignore your symptoms
- Call a friend, neighbor, family member, or your doctor
- Go online to look up information about heart attacks
- Drive yourself to the hospital

### DO

- Call 911
- Unlock your door
- Lie down on the floor where you can be seen

If you think you could be having a heart attack, you don't have time to figure out if you're right. Call 911 right away. If it's not a heart attack, it's OK. After all, it's your life we're talking about!