

Women at Greater Risk of Heart Disease, Stroke

By Roban Johnson

As a 40-something female with a family history of heart disease, it's a little frightening to know that heart disease is the leading cause of death in women over the age of 25. In fact, one in five women in the United States has some form of cardiovascular disease, and two out of every six women will die from either heart disease, stroke or other cardiovascular diseases.

I've never considered myself at risk for heart attack or stroke, and believed over the years that more men than women die from heart disease, yet that assumption, physicians say, is false. According to the American Heart Association, more women than men have died of heart disease, stroke or other cardiovascular diseases every year since 1984. And based on the total number of U.S. deaths in 2001, women represented 53.6 percent of all deaths from cardiovascular diseases and stroke.

"Because we're seeing an increase in both coronary artery disease and heart disease, preventive measures are very important for women," says surgeon Randy Brown with Macon CardioVascular Institute.

While women have marked their calendars for their annual check-up with the OB/GYN, most women do not have a date set for a full physical. That, says Dr. Brown, needs to change. "Women need annual check-ups, especially those with strong family histories of heart disease," he says. These physicals could begin at age 25, with follow-up exams as recommended by their physicians. These physicals are in addition to an annual gynecological exam, and should include cholesterol screening, and possibly a stress test and EKG. "This provides their doctor with a baseline that can be monitored throughout their lives," says Dr. Brown.

Women are more prone to have atypical symptoms, which makes routine evalua-



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tions by their primary care doctor even more important.

Symptoms of atherosclerotic heart disease include shortness of breath, unexplained chest pain and early fatigue. In addition to causing heart attacks, atherosclerosis is also one of the leading causes of stroke when it has narrowed the carotid artery leading to the brain.

"Statistics show that more women than men die from strokes," says Maurice Solis, M.D., one of Dr. Brown's colleagues at Macon CardioVascular Institute. Based on the 2004 update of the American Heart Association's Heart Disease and Stroke Statistics, more

than 100,000 females died from stroke in 2001, which represented over 61 percent of stroke deaths. Further, the American Heart Association reports that 25 percent of women who have an initial stroke die within a year, and 53 percent of women under the age of 65 who have a stroke die within eight years.

While stroke is the third leading cause of death for American women behind heart disease and cancer, it is also a leading cause of serious, long-term disability.

"Hardening of the arteries and blockages in the carotid artery are two of the major causes of stroke," says Dr. Solis, "and stroke is the number one reason people are disabled and in nursing homes when they get older."

Patients who have a strong family history of atherosclerosis and/or stroke, or who are symptomatic, can undergo a non-invasive carotid ultrasound to check for plaque build-up or stenosis.

This diagnostic test is available at Macon CardioVascular Institute's Vascular Lab, which