

Heart diseases leading cause of death among women : Local survivor, physicians have advice on warning signs

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Anna Lee Hinson always considered herself a healthy person, so she was surprised when she had a heart attack six years ago.

Ms. Hinson of St. Margarets was aware of the risks since her husband had heart bypass surgery years before. But one day, she had a pain in her jaw that persisted for hours. It got so bad she went to the emergency room, where she learned she was having a heart attack.

She was later transported to Johns Hopkins, where she had two stents implanted. She later recovered.

"I had to get to the point where I realized this is not something that happens to other people," said Ms. Hinson, 76. "You don't think about women having heart attacks."

Cardiovascular diseases, such as stroke and heart attacks, are top killers among women, surprisingly surpassing cancer. In 2004, about 460,000 women died from a cardiovascular disease, while all forms of cancer combined killed roughly 270,000 women, according to statistics from the American Heart Association.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ranked diseases of the heart and stroke as the top killers of American women in 2004.

Experts said they believe part of the reason for the misconceptions about cancer being a top killer of women is the marketing campaign of the American Cancer Society.

Now the American Heart Association offers its own Get Red campaign, which encourages women to be aware of their risk for heart disease and stroke.

Cardiovascular disease and heart attacks have been thought to be diseases of men," said Dr. Barbara Bean, Ms. Hinson's cardiologist at Anne Arundel Medical Center. "In the last 20 years, we've realized that's not right. It's the No. 1 killer of women above breast cancer, which is always surprising to women."

The symptoms also are different in women. While men may have chest pains, pressure and tightening, women will have other symptoms that they may not think were related to the heart.

However, women's symptoms may be similar to Ms. Hinson's - an unexplainable pain in the jaw or elsewhere and fatigue. Ms. Hinson also had a female friend with a pain in the side and later learned that it was the result of a heart ailment.

"(Women) are not really sure to go to the emergency room (with their symptoms)," said Dr. Stephanie Jacobs, another cardiologist at AAMC. "Our thoughts are that you should always go to the emergency room if there's any question for any reason. We'd like (the patient) to get there as early as possible."

After a surgery, Ms. Hinson went through AAMC's cardiac-rehabilitation program, where physicians monitored her health. She continues to visit Dr. Bean once every six months.

Ms. Hinson had no idea what caused her heart attack, though it may be genetic, since her father had similar problems. She advises her three adult children to take precautions with their health. She also continues to swim and walks every morning.

"We have two dogs that won't let you skip a day (of walking)," Ms. Hinson said. "I highly recommend pets to keep an exercise regimen."