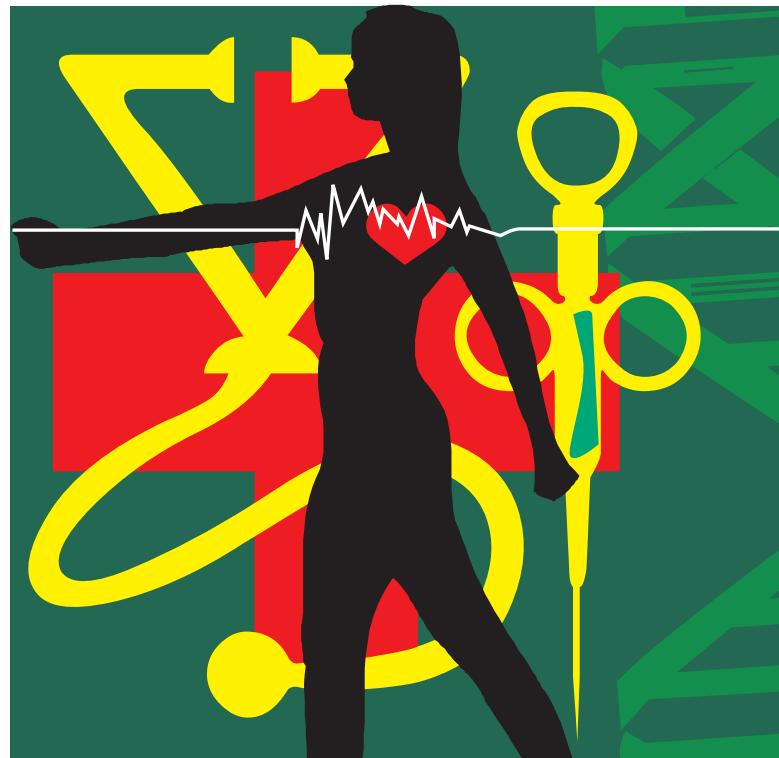


# HOW PREVENTABLE IS HEART DISEASE?

BY TERRI YABLONSKY STAT • ELLIPSIS PHOTOGRAPH



FEBRUARY IS AMERICAN HEART MONTH, so TCW asked three prominent Chicago cardiologists to share their heart health thoughts: Annabelle Volgman, MD, medical director of the Heart Center for Women at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago; Charlotte Bai, MD, cardiologist from Loyola University Medical Center; and Stephen Archer, MD, cardiologist at the University of Chicago Medical Center and chair of the American Heart Association's Metro Chicago Board of Directors.

## HOW SERIOUS IS HEART DISEASE IN WOMEN?

**DR. CHARLOTTE BAI** Heart disease is the number one killer of women. It's more prevalent as a cause of death than all causes of cancer combined. According to the American Heart Association, 37 percent of all female deaths in America occur from heart disease.

**DR. ANNABELLE VOLGMAN** One out of three women will be affected by cardiovascular disease. Since 1984, more women than men have died from heart disease. Everyone thought heart disease was a man's disease. That's when we started to educate women and their doctors that it's not a man's disease. In 2000, we found that hormone replacement therapy (HRT) was causing more heart attacks and stroke in

women than preventing it, so we stopped giving HRT to women without symptoms of menopause. The good news is that the number of women dying from heart disease has been declining since 2000.

## WHAT'S THE MOST MISUNDERSTOOD FACT ABOUT WOMEN'S HEART HEALTH?

**DR. VOLGMAN** People think heart disease is treated the same way in women as in men. There are many differences. For example, young women with risk factors are at very high risk. They should be treated aggressively, not told, 'Don't worry about it.' Women with diabetes are at higher risk for, and have a worse outcome from, heart disease than men with diabetes. Women need to understand that if they have diabetes and are over 40, they need to be on medication to prevent heart attack. A study showed that women with diabetes are at much higher risk for atrial fibrillation than are diabetic men, and there are many good drugs for this. If a woman has diabetes and atrial fibrillation, they're at higher risk for stroke, too.

**DR. STEVEN ARCHER** It's clear from surveys that women fear cancer but are more likely to die from heart disease or stroke. There are ways to manage your risk. By managing your blood pressure, cholesterol



Annabelle Volgman, MD, medical director of the Heart Center for Women, examines a patient.

and following basic guidelines for physical activity, you can modify your risk so dramatically. If you exercise at least five times a week for at least 30 minutes, you'll cut your risk of heart disease by more than 50 percent. Heart disease is very preventable. Although men have a greater risk of heart attack earlier in life, women catch up. Heart attack in women is delayed by 7-10 years. Annually more women than men have strokes, and in older women, more women than men have heart attacks.

## WHAT'S GENERATING BUZZ THESE DAYS IN WOMEN'S HEART HEALTH?

**DR. BAI** There's a concern whether calcium intake without vitamin D is safe or increases the risk of heart attack. Several years ago, a study showed that women who take calcium supplements without vitamin D have a 30 percent higher risk of heart attack. A recent meta-analysis showed the same effect. The jury is still out about whether calcium supplementation is a safe way to prevent and treat osteoporosis. Researchers are still trying to determine what kind of estrogen replacement therapy is safe, if any. Data initially shows that estrogen and progesterone therapy is associated with increased risk of heart attack and stroke. There's still ongoing research in regard to whether there is a formulation of estrogen safer than others. We don't know if any estrogen is safe. From a cardiologist's standpoint, try to limit your use of estrogen replacement.

**DR. ARCHER** It sounds obvious, but tobacco smoking affects women at least as much as men and second hand smoke is also a risk for developing heart disease and cancer. Many women are smoking through their husbands.

## WHAT'S YOUR BEST ADVICE TO KEEP OUR HEARTS HEALTHY?

**DR. ARCHER** Many women have had a mammogram and a Pap

smear, but they don't know their blood pressure. You're more likely to get heart disease than cancer. Ask your doctor for your fasting cholesterol level, fasting blood sugar and blood pressure. Know your weight, body mass index and family history of heart disease. These numbers need to be checked more frequently toward menopause. Knowledge is power.

**DR. BAI** Trust your body and be on top of your own medical care. Many times heart disease is under-diagnosed because of lack of recognition. Be an advocate for yourself. If you have symptoms or a significant family history of heart disease, consider seeing a cardiologist. If you need guidance, ask your primary care doctor. Keep in mind that a woman's presentation of heart attack is different from a man's. Women may notice shortness of breath and severe fatigue, not the classic chest crushing common to men. Women may also notice more gastrointestinal symptoms, such as nausea or indigestion.

**DR. VOLGMAN** Eat right and exercise. Stay slim. People keep trying to find medications and the magic pill to stay healthy. But the old advice holds true. Eat lots of fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Avoid red meat and eat lots of fish.

**DR. ARCHER** The rate of men dying from cardiovascular disease began decreasing in 1985. For women, it didn't go down until 2000-2006. Why did men start living longer in 1985 and women lagged 20 years behind? It's because the message was out there loud and clear. That message started to get to women in the 1990s. It took a long time to break through the cultural barriers. Women are just now getting the message. If you're an African American or Hispanic woman, you're at particular risk for cardiovascular disease. ■

Visit the American Heart Association's website, [www.goredforwomen.org](http://www.goredforwomen.org), for the latest information about how to protect yourself from heart disease.