



# Women and heart health

Many people think that cardiovascular disease (CVD) is only a men's health issue, but it's not. CVD is a major cause of death of women in Australia. It's important to know that women often have a different experience of CVD compared to men. Risk factors and symptoms of CVD can be different, and women are also at a disadvantage when it comes to CVD care.

## What is cardiovascular disease?

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is a term that includes heart disease, stroke, blood vessel disease and heart attack.

## Heart attack symptoms – spot the difference

Common heart attack symptoms for men and women include:

- chest pain or a feeling of pressure, tightness or heaviness in the chest
- shortness of breath or trouble breathing
- indigestion
- nausea (feeling unwell)
- vomiting
- a cold sweat
- dizziness
- tiredness.

Women can also have different symptoms to men and are more likely to have symptoms that don't involve chest pain. Instead, you may have pain in your:

- neck
- jaw
- arms
- back
- shoulders.

## Why the gender gap?

In Australia, women who have a serious heart attack are less likely to receive proper treatment in hospital compared to men. Women are also more likely to die within six months after they've been discharged from hospital.

Women are also 50% more likely to get the wrong diagnosis from a health professional when they have a heart attack.

Research suggests that women who have symptoms of CVD are not treated as quickly as men and are less likely to get the same level of care that men do.

CVD research has traditionally focused more on men. As a result, women are often diagnosed and treated for CVD based on findings about men.

## Closing the gap

To help fight the gender gap, it's important to understand female-related symptoms of CVD and speak up if you notice any worrying changes in your body.

If you have symptoms of heart attack, call 000 straight away.

Also, get to know the risk factors of CVD that are specific to women.

A woman's risk of CVD increases after menopause when levels of the hormone oestrogen have fallen. After menopause, women may have higher blood pressure and cholesterol levels, and may be more at risk of weight gain.

Other female-related risk factors include having an autoimmune condition (e.g. lupus or rheumatoid arthritis), early menopause or polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), taking oral contraception or experiencing pregnancy complications such as pre-eclampsia.

## Protect your heart

There are many other ways you can lower your risk of CVD. For example, it's important to:

- get regular health checks, including blood pressure and cholesterol checks – ask your doctor about what's right for you
- find out if you have a family history of CVD and share this information with your doctor
- eat well, including plenty of fruits, vegetables and wholegrains in your diet
- fit in some physical activity five or more days each week
- manage any risk factors, such as blood pressure, cholesterol, weight, smoking and diabetes.

### When to see your doctor

For most people, a heart health check is recommended at least every two years from age 45 (or from age 30 for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people). Speak to your doctor about what's right for you.

**To learn more about the risks and symptoms of CVD in women, visit [jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/cardiovascular-health](https://jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/cardiovascular-health) or visit the Heart Foundation website, [heartfoundation.org.au](https://heartfoundation.org.au)**

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Disclaimer: This information does not replace medical advice. If you are worried about your health, talk to your doctor or healthcare team.

We write health information for people with diverse backgrounds, experiences and identities. We use the term 'women', but we acknowledge that this term is not inclusive of all people who may use our content.

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