

Script – Print – Sudden cardiac arrest and women

Every year, about 350,000 people suffer sudden cardiac arrest (SCA) outside of a hospital setting with almost 90% of all cases being fatal.

While there is an underlying belief that heart problems such as SCA tend to be more of a concern for men, that's not the case. In fact, women make up almost 40% of SCA episodes. Just as women may experience different symptoms of heart disease than men, their risk of SCA is somewhat different too.

According to Nancy Dagefoerde, an advanced practice nurse with OSF HealthCare Cardiovascular Institute, SCA can happen to any adult 30 and older, depending on risk factors, family history and other issues such as a heart birth defect.

Dagefoerde says SCA is different than a heart attack, which occurs when there is a blockage in a coronary artery on the outside of the heart. Many times, a heart attack is the cause of sudden cardiac arrest.

"Sudden cardiac arrest occurs when there's an irregular heartbeat," she says. "We call it an arrhythmia that causes the heart not to beat or have electrical activity anymore. So, in general, there'll be no breathing and no pulse when you come upon a person that's having a sudden cardiac arrest."

"The thing that may be different with women is oftentimes their symptoms are portrayed differently and they often can get missed," says Dagefoerde. "A woman may come to an emergency room or a health care provider and say, 'I'm more tired' or 'I'm short of breath.' It's not the typical elephant on my chest type of chest pain that a man may have. And so, working them up for their symptoms, although they're vaguer, is important to be preventive to catch these things early before there's damage."

Another reason why women are at a higher risk for SCA is because they are more likely to delay seeking care for their symptoms since women tend to prioritize the health of other family members first.

"As all of us get older, the risk is higher for any of these conditions as far as heart disease, diabetes, blood pressure, so we need to be aware that maybe our numbers were okay, or we were doing pretty good when we were in our 20s and 30s," says Dagefoerde. "But as we age, we need those regular checkups and do that good preventive care, because things do change. And women are caring for husbands and parents, even children and grandchildren and they don't often take the time to care for themselves."

Symptoms of SCA include:

- Fainting
- Dizziness
- Racing or irregular heartbeat
- Chest pain
- Shortness of breath
- Nausea

Risk factors for SCA include a previous heart attack, coronary artery disease, a prior episode of SCA, family history and personal or family history of abnormal heart rhythms, among others.

Dagefoerde has a simple message for any patient who is experiencing any potential cardiac symptoms.

"This is another area that your health prevention will benefit you," she says. "So, seeing your physician on a regular basis, having regular checkups, checking your labs, knowing your family history, knowing your own history, and doing all those things on a regular basis and don't ignore any symptoms that you may be having."

If you see someone drop to the ground and think it could be SCA, call 911 immediately. The faster CPR is started, and defibrillation is administered, the better the chances of survival.

For more information on cardiovascular health, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).